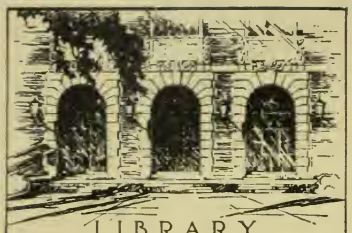

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WORLD'S END.

A Story

IN THREE BOOKS.

BY

RICHARD JEFFERIES.

"With equal ease the Ruler of the sky
The humble lifts, and casts the proud from high:
With ease eclipses glory's dazzling ray,
With ease on abject darkness pours the day:
And bows the strong in might of their renown,
Withered to dust, and rears the bowèd down."—HESIOD.

BOOK III.—RESULTS.

VOL. III.

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WORLD'S END.

BOOK III.

RESULTS.

CHAPTER I.

AFTER a life in which each day was spent in happy anticipation of the pleasures of the next, the calm, quiet existence at The Towers would have been dull and cheerless to Violet. But following so soon upon the death of Waldron, under such awful circumstances, the life with Lady Lechester seemed to her, for awhile at least, like that in a haven of refuge where the storm without could not reach. And had Aymer been there, or near at hand,

she would in a quiet way have been happy.

For Lady Lechester was singularly kind. She made no show of sympathy, she did not ask, as some pretentiously hospitable people do every morning, if she were comfortable and had all she wished. But Agnes possessed a rare and delicate tact, the power of perceiving what others felt, of anticipating their smallest fancies.

She accommodated herself and her habits to Violet, and there grew up between them a firm friendship, and more than that—a companionship. Agnes kept no secret from Violet. Violet had none to hide from her.

There was one topic only which Violet never of her own volition approached, but she was perfectly aware that something of the kind was going on. In an indefinable manner she had learnt that Agnes had a suitor. It came to her knowledge that he was extremely wealthy, but low born in comparison with her long descent. How

Agnes looked upon him it was hard to say. She was fully five-and-thirty, and that is an age at which women begin to feel that now, if ever, is the time when they must choose a companion.

On the other hand it is an age when the glamour of early hope and youthful fancy, are hardly likely to gild the first figure that approaches with a beauty not really its own. It is an age when the mind can choose calmly and deliberately, in the true sense of the word. Violet had never seen this man, or heard his name, but she knew that there was correspondence between them, for she had seen the letters with a foreign post-mark. She gathered that he was in America. After which Agnes whispered that he would shortly be home, and would visit her.

"He is very handsome," she said, for the first time speaking directly upon the subject. "He is a man who could not be passed in a crowd, even were it not for exceptional

circumstances surrounding him. And yet I do not know—I do not know."

Then she was silent again for several days, but presently approached the inevitable topic again.

Would it be possible for a woman to really banish that topic from her mind? Agnes could the more easily confide in Violet, because she was fully aware of her love for Aymer. It is easier to speak to those who have had similar experiences, than to those who are as yet ignorant.

"He is in England, now," said Agnes, one day. "He is not far distant. Why should I conceal it any longer? Your friend Mr. Malet meets him daily, I dare-say; he is a candidate for Stirmingham. It is Mr. Marese Baskette."

"I must congratulate you," said Violet. "He is the richest man in the world, is he not?"

"He will be if he succeeds in obtaining his rights. To tell you the truth, I think

the great battle he is fighting with these companies and claimants, gives me more interest in him than—than—well, I don't know. You will see him soon. He will come directly the election is over. Now you know why I took so much interest in your letters from Mr. Malet, describing the course of the family council. But I think he is wrong, dear, in the last that you showed me. I think I should like to be the owner of that great city—it is true there would be responsibilities, but then there would be opportunities, he forgets that. Think what one could do—the misery to be alleviated, the crime to be hunted out, the great work that would be possible."

Her eyes flashed, her form dilated. It was easy to see that to the ambition innate in her nature, the idea of having an immense city to reign over, as it were, like the princesses of old, was almost irresistible. A true, good woman she was, but it would

have been impossible for her not to have been ambitious.

"With *his* talent," she said—becoming freer upon the subject the longer she dwelt upon it—"with *his* talent, for he is undoubtedly a clever man, with the love the populace there have for him, with my long descent—perhaps the longest in the county—which enables me to claim kindred with powerful families, with a seat in Parliament, there seems no reasonable limit to what we might not do. That is the way to put it. You shall see his letters."

Violet read them. Marese Baskette was gifted with the power of detecting the points which pleased those he conversed or corresponded with, and upon these he dwelt and dilated. It was this that made his speeches so successful in Stirmingham. As he spoke he noted those passages and allusions which awoke the enthusiasm of the audience. Next time he omitted those sentiments which had failed to attract attention, and

confined himself to those which were applauded. In half a dozen trials he produced a speech, every word of which was cheered to the echo.

So, in his intercourse with Agnes Lechester, the same faculty of perceiving what pleased, led him to disregard the ordinary method of lovers; he avoided all mention, or almost avoided, expressions of affection, or of love, and harped upon the string which he had found vibrated most willingly in her breast. The theme was ample and he did not hesitate to work upon it. He compared his position and that of Agnes when united, and when his rights were conceded, to that of the royal reigning dukes of Italy a hundred years ago — dukes whose territory in area was not large, but whose power within that area was absolute.

The city of Stirmingham was in effect a grander possession than Parma or Milan; far more valuable estimated in coin, far more

influential estimated by the extent of its commerce. Without a doubt, when once he had obtained possession, the Government would soon recognise his claims and confer upon him a coronet, unless indeed Agnes preferred a career of perhaps greater power in the House of Commons. He candidly admitted his ignoble descent.

"My ancestor" he wrote, "was a poor basket-maker; there is no attempt on my part to conceal the fact. I am perfectly well aware that upon the score of blood I am far, far, your inferior, and unable to offer a single claim to equality. The Lechesters, I know, were powerful auxiliaries of William, the Conqueror of England. The name is preserved in the Roll of Battle Abbey; it occupies an important place in the 'early chronicles.' Heralds have blazoned its arms, genealogists recorded its descent, poets have sung its fame. Yet remember, even in this view of the matter, that the great William himself, the feudal lord of the

Lechesters, was descended upon the mother's side from a tanner. I cannot compare my father, grand old Sternhold, with William the Conqueror; and yet, in this age when wealth is what provinces and conquered countries used to be, perhaps there may be some faint resemblance."

Then he went on :—"I will not disguise from you the fact that in your long descent, and in your connections with the highest families in the land—not even excepting ancient royalty—I place much of my hope for recovering my legitimate possessions and for fighting my myriad enemies. To me the alliance is simply invaluable. To yourself I would fain hope it would not be without its charms. I do not approach you with a boy's silly affection expressed in rhyme and love-sick glances. I do not follow your footsteps from place to place. It is long since I have had even ten minutes conversation with you. I have treated you as I should an equal (not in position, for

there you are superior), but as my equal in mind and ability; not as your sex is commonly treated. I have not wooed you as a woman. I have asked you to be my partner, something more than my partner in the kingdom—for so in fact it is—which is mine by right."

This tone was exactly fitted to the mind of the person he addressed. Delicate and full of benevolence, kind, thoughtful, anxious always for others good, there was still at the root of Agnes Lechester's mind a strong vaulting ambition. An ambition which some said had warped her mind with overweening pride, which had cut her off from the natural sphere in which she should have moved, leaving her with little or no society, and which, if rumour spoke correctly, had in earlier days forced her to stifle the heart that beat responsive to another's love.

To Violet, this calm, reasoning courtship, full of coronets and crowns, thinking of nothing but power, was inexplicable. Her

heart wrapped up in Aymer, she could not understand this species of barter—of long descent and good family against wealth and property. It seemed unnatural—almost a kind of sacrilege. She fancied that Agnes was not without twinges of conscience, not without hesitation, and naturally put down her apparent vacillation to feelings, similar to those which would have animated herself under the same circumstances.

This is not the place to argue upon marriage; but in passing it does appear that both sides are right and both wrong. It does not of necessity follow that marriage must be for love only; but on the other hand it does not follow that marriage should be for convenience always, and never for affection. In the present instance, to all appearance the parties were exactly fitted to each other. It was notorious that although Lady Lechester had a sufficient income for all her purposes, and even a superfluity, that the revenue from her large estates was greatly

reduced by encumbrances upon it. There were surmises that this comparatively inadequate income was one reason why Agnes saw so little society; she was too proud to mingle in a circle for which her purse was unfitted.

Marese, the moment he had an opportunity, did not lose this chance either. In a letter, which Violet was permitted to read, he gradually and by degrees approached the subject of the mortgages and other encumbrances upon the Lechester estates. Instead of being an obstacle, this very fact, he argued, was one reason why their union was singularly appropriate. At the same moment that her family and connections gave him a position for which otherwise he might have striven in vain, his wealth (Marese always kept up the belief in others that he was, even at present, extremely wealthy) would free those ancient estates, and restore them to their pristine splendour.

Then came a brief telegram, announcing

that he had won the representation of Stirmingham by a majority of 1000 votes. Agnes was visibly elated. She moved with a prouder step—there was a slight flush upon her usually pale cheek. It was a proof of his genius—of that godlike genius which commands men. He possessed the same qualities which in the ages past had made the Lechesters members of the ruling race.

Violet saw that the balance bowed in his favour. If he were to come now—and he did come.

Scarcely three days after the election, Marese drove up to The Towers, and was received with a stately courtesy—a proud indifference which bewildered Violet. She knew, or thought she knew, that Agnes's heart was beating with excitement—yet how calm, how distant and formal she appeared.

Violet looked with interest upon Marese, having heard so much of him from Aymer and Agnes.

On his part, meeting her attentive gaze and hearing her name, Marese slightly started, recovered himself, and bowed profoundly. His attention was wholly bestowed upon Lechester; the conversation between them seemed to Violet constrained and cold to the last degree. She could not help acknowledging that Marese was a handsome man—far handsomer in features and figure than was Aymer. But how different! In her heart of hearts she pitied poor Agnes if such was her choice.

They betrayed no desire whatever to be alone; on the contrary, Agnes particularly desired Violet to remain in the apartment with them. Their talk was of distant things, till it travelled round to the scene of Marese's candidature, and finally fixed itself upon the great case. Marese was extremely sanguine in his language, and indeed he was so in reality. He had gained two important steps he said. In the first place he had partly paid off the claims of the companies

for expenses incurred during their tenure of the leases, on the pretence of improving the estate. These expenses reached a preposterous figure; he had succeeded in getting them taxed and considerably reduced, and he had also succeeded in obtaining an order from the Court of Chancery that the payment of these claims should be made by instalments. He casually mentioned that the first instalment of 100,000*l.* had been paid yesterday. The second step was his admittance to Parliament, which, properly worked, would enable him to obtain the support of the party now in power.

Still further, the great family council had blown over without result. The mountain had been in labour, and a mouse had sprung forth. That spectre which had hovered over the city of Stirmingham so long—the spectre of the American claims—had at last put in its appearance, and was found to be hollow and unsubstantial. He did not think there was anything more to

be dreaded from that spectral host. The building societies even, despaired of being able to prolong the contest by supporting the American claims. They could no longer refuse to give up possession on the ground that they did not know who was the true heir. It could not be denied who was the heir.

Marese stayed but one afternoon. He was too wise to make himself common. Before he went he formally asked for a private interview. What passed Violet easily gathered from what Agnes said to her afterwards.

"Mr. Broughton will be here in a day or two," she said; "tell Mr. Malet to come with him. The mortgages I have told you of are to be paid off; Broughton will manage it."

From which it was evident that a definite understanding had been come to with Marese. Agnes was silent and thoughtful all the evening. Towards the time

when they usually retired, she called Violet to the window, and put her arm round her neck.

"Suppose," she said, "all the meadows and hills you see out there were yours, and had been your ancestors for so many centuries—remember, too, that we may die however well we feel—should you like to think that the estate would then fall into the helpless hands of one of two lunatics?"

It was clear that the natural hope of children to inherit had influenced her. Violet had heard something of the lunacy inherent in certain branches of the Lechester family.

CHAPTER II.

THE manner in which Marese Baskette became acquainted with Lady Lechester affords another instance of those "circumstances over which we have no control," which have already been so strongly illustrated in this history. In the course of his purchases of land and property, old Sternhold Baskette was so shrewd and far-seeing, and so difficult to impose upon, that only once did he make any considerable mistake.

It happened that among other land which he bought at no great distance from Stirmingham, there was a small plot of not much more than two acres, which was included in a large area, and not specified particularly in the agreement. This plot

had been in the hands of tenants who had lived so long upon it that they believed they had acquired a prescriptive right. They sold their right to a person whom we may call A, and A sold it in common with other property to Sternhold Baskette. The thing was done, no questions asked, and apparently no one thought anything more about it. But what piece of land is there so small that it can escape the eagle eye of an English lawyer? And especially when that lawyer is a new broom, and a rising man determined to make his mark.

So it happened that Mr. Broughton, Lady Lechester's new solicitor (and successor to his uncle's practice), in going over the map of the estate, and comparing it with older maps, found out that there was a certain two-acre piece missing; and being anxious to recommend himself to so good a client as Lady Agnes, lost no time in tracing out the clue to it.

He had not much difficulty in dis-

covering the facts of the case, but it was very soon apparent to his legal knowledge that although the documentary claim of Lady Agnes, and her moral right, were indisputable, yet the whole value of the little property would probably be swallowed up in costs, if an attempt was made to recover it. He represented the fact to her, but Lady Agnes at once instructed him to proceed.

The same over-mastering pride which was the one fault of her character, lent an almost sacred value to every piece of land, however small, which had once formed part of the estate of her ancestors. Not one rood of ground would she have parted with, not one perch should remain in the hands of strangers whilst she had the means of disputing possession. Yet this was the very woman who, with open-handed generosity, was ever ready to succour or assist the poor, and would not hesitate to spend large sums of money to give another person a pleasure.

Mr. Broughton went to law and quickly found it a tough job, for this was one of those small properties which old Sternhold had been able to keep in his own hands, and his son Marese was not disposed to part with it, especially as with lapse of time—although situated far from the city proper—it had increased in value some twenty-five per cent.

Broughton advised Lady Agnes not to go to the inevitable expense of protracted litigation; but she was firm, and the battle began in the Courts, when suddenly, as the forces advanced to the fight, the enemy gave in and surrendered without firing a shot.

It was a piece of Theodore's work. That subtle brain of his had perceived a means by which Marese might, if he played his cards rightly, obtain the value of this little plot of land ten times over. Why not marry this Lady Lechester? She would give him exactly what he wanted—a position

and connections among the nobility which all the wealth of old Sternhold could not buy.

"Who is Lady Lechester?" asked Marese.

Theodore told him. He knew, because in the asylum at Stirmingham there were two lunatics of that family, the most profitable of the patients the asylum contained.

"If any accident should happen to either of those patients," said Theodore, "Lady Lechester's property would be doubled; if an accident happen to both of them, it would be trebled. Accidents sometimes happen in the best regulated asylums. The easiest way to get rid of a lunatic who exhibits homicidal tendencies is—to let him escape. He kills two or three, and then—he cuts his own throat. With a lunatic who has not got homicidal tendencies, and whose madness is, between ourselves, a *matter of opinion*—with such persons there are other methods; but no matter, get Lady Lechester first." And Marese, seeing

that his (Theodore's) words were good, did as he was advised.

One day there called at The Towers a gentleman, who was received by Lady Agnes in the most distant manner, for she recognised his name as that of her opponent. Marese met her with a species of mingled deference and pride, exactly suited to the person he addressed. He begged pardon for his intrusion; he felt that an apology was due to Lady Lechester which written words could not convey. His lawyers had involved him in a mistaken and ungentlemanly contest. When he had learnt that his antagonist was a lady, and a lady of distinguished position, he had looked into the matter personally, and at once saw that whatever claim the chicanery of the law gave him, was far over-balanced by the moral and social right of Lady Lechester. He had at once stayed proceedings, had ordered his solicitors to immediately restore possession to Lady Lechester, and had come

in person to offer his sincere apology for the trouble he had inadvertently caused.

Be sure that Marese's personal appearance had something to do with his success. At all events Lady Agnes was deeply impressed with his conduct, which she easily ascribed to a nobility of mind; and not to be outdone, while she freely accepted the land, she insisted upon disbursing a sum sufficient to cover the money that had been spent on it.

From that hour Marese was a favoured visitor at The Towers. He came but rarely, but when he came his presence lingered after him. His name, as the heir of Stirmingham, was constantly before her in the papers and on everyone's lips. Add to this his own deep artifice, and it is not to be wondered at that he made progress.

At last it came to pass that Broughton was engaged in arranging the clearing off of certain heavy incumbrances upon the Lechester estate, with money which Marese had received for salvage of the *Lucca*.

Such an arrangement could only mean marriage.

Not long after Marese's visit to The Towers, Aymer arrived with Broughton, bringing with him a collection of pictures, old Bibles, and some few bronzes for Lady Lechester, and a heart full of affection for Violet. He was invited to stay several days, and did so, and for that brief time the joys they had shared at The Place seemed to return. The weather of early spring was too chilly for much out-of-door exercise; but they had all the vast structure of The Towers to wander over—galleries and corridors, vast rooms where they were unlikely to be interrupted, for now the new wing had been built, very few of the servants ever entered the old rooms, and Lady Agnes never. Aymer had come with his mind full of a thousand things he had to say—of love, of hope, of projects that he had formed, and yet when they were together, and the silent rooms invited

him to speak, he found himself instead listening to Violet's low voice as she told him all about her life at The Towers, and her feelings for him. It was natural that, the first pleasures of their meeting over, Violet should speak of Lady Agnes, and Aymer of the heir, with whose fortunes he had of late seemed to be mixed up. Violet was full of a subject which she had long wanted to confide to Aymer, and yet hardly liked to write. It was about some singularities of Lady Agnes.

She was very kind, very affectionate and considerate, and yet, Violet said, it seemed to those who lived with her constantly that she had something for ever preying upon her mind. She was subject to fits of silence and abstraction, which would seize her at unaccountable times, and she would then rise and withdraw, and shut herself up in her own room for hours; and once for as long as two days she remained thus secluded.

At such times she generally used a small room in the new wing, the key of which never left her hands, and which no one entered but herself. Another singular habit which she had was going out at night, or after dusk, into the most unfrequented portion of the park. She would seem to be seized with a sudden desire to escape all notice and observation, would put on her hat, wrap herself in a plain shawl, and let the weather be what it might, go forth alone. The servants were so well acquainted with this habit that they never offered to accompany her—indeed, it was part of the household etiquette to affect not to notice her at these times. Her absence rarely exceeded an hour, but knowing that poachers were often abroad, Violet owned that these nocturnal rambles filled her with alarm while they lasted. Another peculiar thing was that Lady Agnes seemed at times as if she believed there was a third person in the room, invisible to others. Once, Violet going into

her apartment, surprised her talking in an excited tone, and found to her astonishment that there was no one near her. She was about to retire, when she was transfixed with astonishment to see that Agnes held a naked sword in her hand, which she would point at some invisible object, and then speak softly in a tongue that Violet did not understand, but believed to be Latin. Violet saw that she was not perceived. Agnes' eyes were wide open, but fixed and staring, as if she saw and yet did not see. Afraid, and yet unwilling to call assistance, Violet remained in the ante-chamber, and presently there was a profound silence. She cautiously went in and found the sword returned to its position over the mantelpiece, and Lady Agnes fast asleep in her armchair.

What ought she to do? Ought the family physician, Dr. Parker, to be made acquainted with these facts, or was it best to pass them unnoticed? Violet was half

afraid to say so, but at these times an ill-defined dread would arise lest Agnes' mind was partly affected. Insanity was well known to run in the Lechester family. Violet's gentle and affectionate mind was filled with fear lest her benefactress should suffer some injury. What had she better do?

It was a difficult question, and Aymer could not answer it. To him, Lady Lechester appeared to be of perfectly sound mind; he could hardly believe the strange things Violet had told him. At all events it would be best not to take any action at present; better wait and watch if these symptoms developed themselves. Violet should keep as close a watch upon Lady Agnes as was compatible with not arousing her suspicions, and yet——

The selfishness of the true lover came to the surface. He did not like to leave his love in a house where the mistress was certainly given to odd habits, and might

possibly be really insane—not even though that mistress had shown the most disinterested and affectionate interest in her. But what could he do? His time was up, he must return to Broughton and recommence the old dreary round of labour, to recommence the book he was writing in his solitary apartments. The poor fellow was very miserable at parting, though Agnes asked him to come when he chose.

Violet was less moved than her lover. The truth was she had an unlimited confidence in Aymer's genius, and believed it would triumph over every obstacle.

It was very strange, but these symptoms she had described to Aymer, seemed to increase and strengthen directly afterwards. Lady Lechester seemed to desire more and more to be alone: she wandered more frequently out into the park, not only by night but in the open daylight; and Violet watching her, and yet ashamed to watch, learnt which way her steps tended, and

was always prepared, if any alarm was given, to start at once for the spot.

That spot was about half-a-mile, perhaps a little more, from The Towers, and just within the park walls. It was concealed from The Towers by the intervening trees which dotted the park, but there was no wood or copse to pass through in reaching it.

Wherever a rapid river eats its way through a hilly country, and where streams dash down from the hills to join it, there singular tunnels, or whatever the proper name may be, are often found. The Ise (obviously a corruption of Ouse) was a narrow, clear stream, extremely rapid, and confined between high banks, which made it, for two-thirds of its career, practically inaccessible.

At this particular place, in days gone by, it appeared as if a stream, perhaps flowing from some long extinct glacier, had cut its way down to the river by boring a narrow,

circular tunnel through the bank of the river. This tunnel was narrow at the top, not larger than would admit the body of a man, but widened as it descended, till where it reached the river there was a considerable cave, and any one kneeling on the sward above could look down upon the water of the river in the dim light, and hear its gurgling, murmuring sound rise up, greatly increased in volume by the acoustic properties of the tunnel, which somewhat resembled the famed Ear of Dionysius, though of course irregular in shape. When the river was swollen with rain or snow, the water came halfway up the tunnel, and the gurgling noise then rose into a hissing, bubbling sound, like that from a huge cauldron of boiling water. Hence, perhaps, its popular name of "Pot." Such "Pots" are to be found, more or less varied in construction, in many parts of England, and generally associated with some local tradition of supernatural beings, or of ancient heroes.

This particular funnel was known as Kickwell Pot—an apparently unmeaning name. The antiquaries, however, would have it that Kickwell was a degenerate form of Cwichhelm, the name of a famous chieftain in the days when the Saxons and Britons fought for the fairest isle of the sea. Probably, they added, Cwichhelm, in one of his numerous battles, was defeated, and perhaps forced to take refuge in this very cave, which was accessible in a canoe or small boat from below, and may have been larger and more capable of habitation then than in our time. At all events, Kickwell Pot had a bad name in the neighbourhood, and there were traditions that more than one man had lost his life, by attempting to descend its precipitous sides in search of treasure temptingly displayed by a dwarf. This may or may not have been founded upon some old worship of a water-spirit or cave-god. The effect was that the common people shunned the spot.

It was a wild place. The beech trees and the great hawthorns, which half-filled that side of the park, completely hid all view of the mansion, and on the right and left were steep downs, so thinly clad with vegetation that the chalk was bare in places. In front swirled along the dark river, whose bank rose twenty feet almost sheer cliff, and opposite was a plantation of fir. On the left hand, facing the fir plantation, was the low stone wall of the park which ended here. Near the mouth of "The Pot," round which some one had built up a loosely-compacted wall of a few stones without mortar, to keep sheep from falling in, was the trunk of a decayed oak tree, once vast in size and reaching to a noble height, now a mere stump, but still retaining a certain weird grandeur. Its hollow trunk formed a natural hut, facing "The Pot" and the dark fir plantation.

This was a singular spot for the mistress

of that fair estate to frequent almost at all hours of the day and night. No wonder that Violet, having ascertained its character, grew more and more alarmed, and kept a closer watch.

CHAPTER III.

WHEN even the most strictly logical mind looks round and investigates the phenomena attending its own existence, perhaps the first fact to attract attention by its strongly marked prominence, is the remarkable loneliness of man. He stands alone. He may have brethren, but they are far below, and like Joseph's seen in the dream, must bow the knee to his state. There extends, as it were, behind him a vast army of bird, beast, reptile, fish, and insect, thronging the broad earth in countless myriads, whose ancestry goes back into periods of time which cannot be expressed by notation. And every one of these, from the tiniest insect to the majestic elephant, is man's intellectual

inferior; so that he stands alone on a pedestal on the apex of a huge pyramid of animal life. He looks back—there are millions of inferior creatures. He looks forward—where is his superior? His mind easily grasps the idea of a superior, but where is it? He cannot see, feel, touch, or in any way indisputably prove the existence of a superior being, or race of beings. Yet the mind within is so wonderful and so complex, that it *will* not accept the conclusion that he really stands alone; that he is the completion and the keystone of creation. A little thought convinces him of his own shortcomings, tells him how far he is from perfection, and the analogy of all things teaches him almost instinctively to look above into the Unknown for a superior being, or a race of beings. It is contrary to all reason and logic, to all analogy and all imagination, that there should be so many myriads behind, and nothing in *front*. There must be beings in front of him in the

scale of existence, just as he is in front of the beings in his rear. Where are they?

The answer to that question has peopled the whole universe with invisible beings. The solid earth beneath our feet has, according to one form of mythology, its gnomes and dwarfs, low of stature, grimy of aspect, but mighty in strength; or it has its Pluto and its Proserpine, its Titans struggling under Etna. The air and the sky above us teem with such shapes; they follow us night and day as our good and evil genii, or they engage in mighty battles—Armageddons of the angels in the empyrean, echoes of whose thundering charges reach our ears on earth.

Such a belief has existed from the earliest days; it has spread over the whole world, it dwells in our midst at this very hour; for what is the so-called spiritualism but a new development of the oldest of all creeds? Even the very atheists, or those who deny the existence of a Supreme Deity—all-

creating, all sustaining—even these admit that there is no logical argument conclusively proving that there are not races of beings superior to our imperfect bodies. Modern science goes a step farther, and all but positively asserts that there are such creatures. It has long speculated as to the possibility of life in some shape or another in the stars and suns of the firmament. One grey-headed veteran, foremost in the ranks of the hardest of all science (anatomy), gravely, and step by step, argues out and demonstrates the fact, that all known living beings are developed, as it were, from one archetypal skeleton. And he concludes with the remarkable statement that, according to all laws of geometry (another hard science), this archetypal skeleton is not exhausted yet; it is still capable of further modification, of fresh development—nay, even that the strange beings with wings and wheels seen by Ezekiel in his vision, are possibilities of the same skeleton. The belief in

itself is therefore not a matter for ridicule, however much we may deplore some of the forms which it has taken.

Violet, watch how she might, never learnt the whole secret of Agnes Lechester's apparent vagaries. The genesis of an idea in the mind is difficult to trace; but substantially the circumstances were these.

Fifteen years since, Lady Agnes Lechester was seen and loved by a certain Walter de Warren, a cornet in a dragoon regiment: a lad of good family but miserably poor. Agnes returned his affection: her heart responded to his love, but her pride forbade a marriage. He was not only poor, but had no kind of distinction: nothing whatever to mark him out from the common herd of men except a handsome face and figure. Even then the innate pride of the Lechesters' was stirring in Agnes's inner mind, and love as she might, nothing would induce her to listen to him.

This disposition on her part was en-

couraged by the trustees of the estate, or rather guardians, who, under pretence of keeping up the dignity of the family, represented to her that such a union would be disgraceful. Let the young man win his spurs, and then his poverty would be no obstacle in their sight. They had an object in view in retarding the marriage of their ward. It was true that no salary or commission was allowed for the management of the estate; but all wise men know that there are ways and means of making a profit in an indirect manner. Evil report said that more than one of the mortgages which encumbered the property had been incurred, not from necessity, or from the consequences of extravagance, but simply in order that these parties might receive a handsome gratuity for the permission given to put out large sums at a safe interest.

De Warren was deeply affected when Agnes calmly told him her view of the matter, admitted without reserve that she

liked him—loved she could not say, though that was the truth—but added that marriage or further intercourse was impossible, so long as he remained unknown and unheard of among men.

He kissed her hand, and swore to win distinction or to perish. He at once exchanged or volunteered—I forget which, but I think the latter—into a detachment going to China.

When once Agnes had received a letter, which had travelled with its message of love and admiration over those thousands and thousands of miles of ocean, then she realised how she had cut herself off from her own darling; and her heart, before so cold and hard, softened, and was full of miserable forebodings. She lost much of her youthful beauty—the incessant anxiety that gnawed at her heart deprived her cheeks of their bloom, and her form of its graceful lines. She grew pale, even haggard, and people whispered that the heiress was fast going

into a decline. Hours and hours she spent alone in the room of the old mansion where the parting had taken place. Sitting there in the Blue Room, as it was called, her mind filled with pictures of war and its dangers, her soul ever strung up to the highest pitch of anxious waiting, what wonder was it that Agnes began to see visions and to dream dreams—visions that she never mentioned, dreams that she never told. It would be easy to argue that what happened was a mere coincidence; that her fears had excited her mind; and that if the actual event had not lent a factitious importance to the affair, it would have passed as a mental delusion.

Certain it was that in May, about ten months after De Warren's departure, Agnes grew suddenly cheerful—the very opposite to what she had been. She sang and played, and danced about the old house. She said that something had told her that De Warren was coming home. No letter had reached

her to that effect; the war was still going on, and yet she was perfectly certain that for some reason or other the cornet was returning—and, what was better, was returning covered with honours. Those in the house looked upon this sudden change of spirits and manner as a certain sign that something would happen to the heiress, and her faithful old nurse (dead before Violet's advent) kept a close watch upon her.

One day, a curious thing happened. In the midst of lunch, Lady Agnes sprang up from table with a joyful but hysterical laugh, and declared that Walter was coming on horseback, and she must go and meet him. Quick as thought she had her hat on, and rushed out of the house, the nurse following at a little distance, anxious to see what would happen.

Lady Agnes walked swiftly across the park to a little wicket-gate in the wall, where Warren used to meet her. Then she stopped and looked along the path, while

the nurse hid behind the trunk of a beech tree at a short distance. In a few minutes Agnes cried out, "I hear him—I hear him; it is his footstep." Then a minute afterwards she flung out her arms as if embracing some one, and cried, and seemed to kiss the air, uttering warm words of affection. The nurse saw nothing—only a light puff of wind stirred the leaves and caused a rustling.

Agnes in a few moments turned to the right, and began to walk, or rather glide, as it seemed to the excited fancy of the nurse, at a swift pace, all the while talking as if to some person who accompanied her, and every now and then pausing to throw her arms round his neck, and uttering an hysterical sob. She made straight for "The Pot," and went quickly round the oak stump. The nurse followed rapidly, and as she peeped round the oak there was Lady Agnes facing her on the other side of "The Pot," with both arms extended and her face

white as death. "Walter," she said, distinctly; "Walter, what does that red spot on your forehead mean? Are you angry?" Then she fell prone on the grass in a dead faint, and the nurse had immense trouble to get her home again.

Just a month afterwards came the news that Walter was dead, having been shot in the *forehead* with a ball from a matchlock while leading on his men. He had won much praise by his desperate courage, and the last despatch recommended him for promotion, and for the Cross for saving life under heavy fire.

Now, looked at dispassionately by others, the whole incident resolves itself into a case of excitement and over-anxiety acting upon a naturally sensitive organisation. But it was easy to see how to Lady Agnes the affair wore a very different light. To her the imaginary shape, invisible to others, which had met her at the little wicket-gate, was real—the spirit of her lover, which had

come from the wilds of China, over thousands of miles, to acquaint her in dumb show of the destruction of its body.

From that moment she became a devout believer in the power of the dead to revisit their friends. She was not alarmed. On the contrary, the thought soothed her. She expected and waited for Walter's second approach, and spoke lovingly when he came again. For he, or the unsubstantial vision in his form, did come again and again, and always in one of two places—in the Blue Room, or beside "The Pot." That strange freak of Nature had been the favourite resort of the lovers in the bygone time. Agnes counted the time for the approach of the spirit; those who waited upon her could tell when she believed the time for the appearance was near, by the peculiar light in her eyes, and the glow upon her cheek. At such times the superstitious servants hastened to get out of the room. After awhile Agnes became conscious that these

things were noticed and commented upon, and it became her practice, when she felt the time coming, to retire to her own room and lock herself in.

Reflecting upon these periodical visits of what she really believed was the spirit of her dead lover, Agnes naturally went on to consider the whole question of the existence of supernatural beings. She purchased works upon demonology and witchcraft, and being an accomplished scholar did not confine her studies to her own language, but read deeply in Agrippa, and the necromancers of the Middle Ages. There were those who said that while upon the Continent she plunged into these forbidden mysteries, and found in the recesses of foreign capitals, men with whom there still lingered the knowledge how to control the spirits of the air. In part this was true; whether self-deceived or not, it was certain that Agnes really believed there were genii with whom she could converse almost at

pleasure. How was it then that, always anxious for Warren's presence, she yet disliked The Towers?

Soon after she began to study these magical books, and to attempt to penetrate the veil which covers the ethereal world from the eyes of poor humanity, it appeared to her that whenever Walter came, his face wore a sad aspect, almost of upbraiding. And beside him there rose up a Darkness: something without form and void, and yet which was there—something which chilled her blood. After awhile it began to take the shape of a thin column of darkness; even in the broad sunlight there was this spot where no light would penetrate. It came too without Walter; it rose up in the middle of the room where she sat—a dark presence, a shadow which haunted her everywhere.

I cannot explain this; I can only record that it was the case. It was this that made Agnes dislike The Towers, and live in the

new wing. Yet even there she did not escape. The shadow took a shape.

There is a sentence in a certain grand old book, which prays that we may be delivered from the pestilence which walketh in darkness. The thought of that is awful enough. But there is something more awful still. Ancient books, which mention such things in a far-off manner, as if one were speaking under the breath, refer in a dim way to the noonday phantom—the phantom which meets the huntsman at midday in the green and shady wood; which stops the maiden at the fountain with her pitcher, in the glare of the sunbeams; which addresses the shepherd suddenly upon the hillside as he watches his sheep under the blue vault of the sky. To the darkness and the night, the spirits seem to have a natural claim—it is their realm; the boldest of us have sometimes felt an unaccountable creeping in the thick darkness. But at noonday, when one

would naturally feel safe, by one's side in the daylight, this is a thousand times worse. The noonday phantom came to Agnes. The dark shadow, the thin column of darkness like smoke, took to itself a shape.

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CHAPTER IV.

EVER since the world began it has been the belief of mankind that desolate places are the special haunt of supernatural beings. To this day the merchants who travel upon camels across the deserts of the East, are firmly persuaded that they can hear strange voices calling them from among the sandhills, and that at dusk wild figures may be seen gliding over the ruins of long-lost cities. It is useless to demonstrate that the curious noises of the desert, are caused by the tension which the dead silence causes upon the nerves of the ear, or by the shifting of the sand, and the currents of air which the heated surface of the sand makes whirl about. The belief is so natural that it cannot be entirely

eradicated. In the olden times in our own fair England, and not so very long ago either, there was not a wild and unfrequented place which had not got its spirit. The woods had their elves and wild huntsmen, the meadows their fairies, the fountains their nymphs, the rocks and caves their dwarfs, and the air at night was crowded with witches travelling to and fro.

Let any one who possesses a vivid imagination and a highly-wrought nervous system, even now, in this nineteenth century, with all the advantages of learning and science, go and sit among the rocks, or in the depths of the wood and think of immortality, and all that that word really means, and by-and-by a mysterious awe will creep into the mind, and it will half believe in the possibility of seeing or meeting something—*something*—it knows not exactly what.

Agnes Lechester went into the desolate

places fully expecting to meet her lover, and she met——.

A more desolate place than the Kickwell Pot could not easily be found in highly-cultivated England, so near to an inhabited mansion. Even in winter, when the leaves were off the trees, there was not a place where a view could be got of it from the mansion, and when there the visitor was, to all intents and purposes, isolated from the world. In summer it was still more hidden, for the thick leaves above, and the tall brake fern growing luxuriantly beneath, obstructed the view, and it was impossible to see for more than a dozen yards. There was but one spot from whence it was possible to overlook "The Pot," and that was from the summit of the Down on the right. But this Down was totally deserted. The very sheep kept aloof from it. Its steep sides were almost inaccessible even to their nimble feet, and the soil was so thin that no herbage grew

to reward the bold climber. Shepherds kept their flocks away from that neighbourhood, for if a sheep lost its footing and stumbled, there was no escape. The body must roll and rebound till it reached the swift river below, which running between steep banks was not easy to get at, and death by drowning was certain. In the course of time many had been lost in this way, and now care was taken that the flocks should not travel in that direction. Animal life almost entirely avoided the bare chalk cliffs. Sometimes a hawk would linger on the edge, as it were, poising himself on his wings but a few feet above the ridge, as if glorying in defiance of the depth below. Sometimes a solitary crow would alight upon the hill, to devour the spoil it had carried off, in peace and undisturbed. In the fir plantation on the other side of the river a few pigeons built, and now and then a loud jay chattered, and a squirrel peeped out from the topmost

branches among the cones. The woodpecker might be heard now and then tapping in the great beech trees, and a brown rabbit would start out from among the fern. But so far as man was concerned the spot was totally desolate: no path passed near, the common people avoided it. It was a desolate place.

In summer time a place to meditate in. To sit upon the sward, leaning back against the vast trunk of the dead oak tree, listening to the gentle murmur of the river, as it rose up out of the mouth of "The Pot" close to the feet. In winter a weird and sinister spot, when the trees were bare and dark, the fir trees gloomy and black, when the snow lodged in great drifts upon the Downs, and the murmur of the river rose to a dull, sullen roar, resounding up the strange, natural funnel. When the grey clouds hung over the sky, and the mist clung to the hill, and the occasional gusts of bitter wind rustled the dead beech leaves—then

indeed it was a desolate place. It was here that the darkness, the thin column of smoke-like darkness, began to grow into form and shape; and as it took to itself a figure, so the vision of poor Walter faded away, and lost its distinctness of outline.

Agnes saw before her a something that was half-human and half-divine; and yet which a species of instinct told her was not wholly good, perhaps only apparently good. The face was human and yet not human—so much grander, nobler, full of passions, stronger, more irresistible than ever yet played upon the features of a man. The brow spoke of power illimitable, of foresight infinite, of design, and deep, fathomless thought. The chin and mouth spoke of iron will, of strength to rive the solid rock and overthrow a tower, of a purpose relentlessly pursued. The eyes were unbearable, searching, burning like a flame of fire. The form uncertain, ill-defined, yet full of a flowing grace and majestic grandeur. It

was winged. There was a general resemblance between this being and those strange creatures—half man, half deity—which are depicted upon the slabs from the palace at Nineveh; only that those pictures are flat and tame, spiritless, mere outline representations. This was full of an intense vitality—a magnetic vigour.

It did not speak; yet she understood its thoughts and its wishes. They filled her with a swelling hope, and yet with unutterable dread:—to place herself willingly, unhesitatingly, without a grain of distrust, within those arms; to be folded to its breast; to feel the wings spread out, and to rush with breathless haste into space, seeking the home of the immortals, the bride of a spirit. The pride of her mind found an unspeakable joy in the belief that such a fate was possible for her—nay, was ever waiting for her—it was but for her to step forward, and in a moment——

The illimitable ambition of her soul urged

her on. She never doubted the possibility —"And the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were fair"—what happened then could happen now. Yet something held her back, and that something was Walter—the faint indistinct vision of Walter. He seemed to shake his head mournfully, to beckon with his hand, to grow paler and unhappy, as her frame of mind disposed her more and more to join the ineffable being which stood before her. The warfare, as it were; the struggle between the two grew insupportable; she was torn with conflicting thoughts, doubts, and fears. This was one reason why she so earnestly desired companionship; and in the presence of Violet she found temporary relief.

The offer of Marese Baskette introduced a new element of trouble and confusion in her mind. She had, as it were, a double existence; she lived two lives. One, visible to others with men and woman, mortal like

herself; the other, unseen, was spent with the spirit of the dead, and with a spirit which had never known mortality. Yet it was not two minds, but one mind; for all through this dual nature there ran the same master chord. As in the physical life, so in the mental. In the physical life, the proud position Marese offered her attracted her irresistibly; so, in the mental life, the figure of Walter grew fainter and fainter, and that of the Genius, offering supremacy and superiority, became more distinct, larger, and more powerful. The struggle now lay between Marese and the Genius—the vision of the dead Walter faded entirely away. Which should she choose—an earthly kingdom, or little less, with opportunities such as had never before fallen to the lot of a mortal; or should she soar up into the empyrean on the breast of that wonderful and glorious being who grew brighter, more lovely, the longer she gazed upon him?

It was the spirit she went to meet by day and night at the side of "The Pot."

It was the belief among the ancients that persons afflicted with certain diseases, or of unsound mind, were possessed by spirits; and still further, they seem to have quite understood that the possessed person had, as it were, two evils at once. The disease was not the spirit, nor the spirit the disease. These were distinct. Those who could exorcise the spirit had also to cure the disease, though the one generally followed the other.

It is hard to understand the intense reality of the vision seen by Agnes, except upon some similar theory. That the inherent insanity of the Lechester family had developed itself in her mind, unsuspected by others, there can be no doubt; but even to the persons who are subject to illusions of the mind, the reality of their visions is seldom, if ever, so absolutely believed in as these were by Lady Agnes. There is just

the possibility, even atheists will not deny the *possibility*—but it is better not to argue the matter. It is sad, indeed, to record the affliction which had fallen upon this most estimable and generous woman, if we regard it as insanity only; if we go a step further, and admit the possibility alluded to, it is sadder still.

At home, in the new wing, the darkness rarely came now, though there was the sense of a presence. It was by the side of "The Pot" that the figure showed itself fully. It rose up from the strange funnel, as if a mist hardened and solidified into shape. It stood before her silent, yet speaking unutterable things.

In the cold winter, when the sky was grey with cloud, the firs black and gloomy, and the drifted snow lay in heaps upon the Downs, there mingled with the sullen roar of the river resounding up "The Pot," a voice from this mysterious being, which in the savage, fierce desolation of that place

spoke of a pride, of an ambition, which rose above even utter failure and degradation. Of a strength of mind which gloried even in its fall; which defied the very heavens in its grandeur; which could not be subdued—immortal in its pride.

As the spring stole on and the soft rain fell, as the buds sprang forth and the thrush sang with joy, the figure grew brighter; an intense vitality seemed to pass from it to her—a glow of life which said, "Come with me; we will wander amid forests such as earth even in its youth never saw, by the shore of lakes such as mortal eye never gazed upon; we will revel in an immortal youth—in a sunshine inconceivable in beauty."

It was but a step to those arms; she longed, yet she did not take it. At night, when the sky glittered with stars and a solitary planet beamed in the west, the eyes of the shape grew into blazing coals, and her soul was aware that it was thinking of unutterable mysteries, of knowledge locked

up for ages and ages, in the infinite space beyond those points of light. Oh, to penetrate into that silent chamber, to walk with reverent footsteps in that library of the universe, to read the wondrous truths written there—to read which was, in itself, life eternal! This, in brief, the spirit spoke to her.

It will now be understood why the strange behaviour of Lady Agnes seemed to grow stranger after the last visit of Marese Baskette and her practical acceptance of his offer. The moment she had in a manner given her hand to him, the claims of the other and supernatural life appeared to be infinitely superior—as is the common case when one has decided, the other course always seems preferable. Yet she could not easily withdraw from her word, nor indeed did she altogether wish to do so; and this indecision drove her into a restless frame of mind. Her visits to "The Pot" became more and more frequent—some-

times she would go there four times in the course of the day, and once again in the evening. She shut herself in her private room—the one room Violet was never asked to enter—for hours almost every day. There was a restless gleam in her eyes, usually so mild and pleasant.

One evening, after a more than ordinarily restless day had been spent, Agnes suddenly rose up, and retired to her private room. This was usually her custom before going out alone into the park, but on this occasion, Violet watching her, saw to her intense surprise that, instead of leaving the house, she unlocked a door which led into the old mansion, and entered the long deserted apartments of The Towers proper. Such a step would have been under any ordinary circumstances nothing to take notice of, but Violet had gradually worked herself up into a state of alarm, and this unusual proceeding created more surmises in her mind even than the lonely walks in

the darkness. She slipped out of the house thinking to watch Agnes' progress through The Towers by the light she carried, which would show which rooms she went into. It fell out exactly as she had supposed—she saw the light of the little lamp flit about from window to window and along the corridors, now disappearing from sight entirely, and now suddenly flickering out again, till at last it stopped in what Violet well knew was the Blue Room. This room was so called from the colour employed in decorating the walls. They were painted instead of being papered, much in the same style as the houses at Pompeii, only in larger panels, and the ground colour was blue. From the lawn in front of the house Violet could just see Agnes seated at a table in this room, and before her was a small desk—a desk she had often noticed in that room, thinking how incongruous a plain gentleman's writing-desk, with brass handles, looked amidst the elegant furniture and decorations.

Out of this desk Agnes was taking what, at that distance, Violet could only conjecture were letters, and burning them one by one in the flame of the lamp.

Presently she paused, and Violet saw her kiss something which looked like a curl of chestnut hair. Then not fancying her self-imposed task of watching her benefactress, and convinced that there was no danger, Violet stole away.

Agnes was, in fact, destroying her memorials of Walter De Warren, which she had kept in his own desk in the room in which she had last seen him alive. She had determined to cast aside all remembrance of him; his memory should not embarrass her in the course she would pursue. Freed from the slightest control by him, she thought that she would be the better able to choose between the earthly and the immortal destinies offered to her. Yet she still lingered, still hesitated. She could not say to Marese "I will," nor could

she say "I will not." She permitted his money to be used in freeing her estate of encumbrance, and this gave him a moral claim upon her hand. After that was done, it seemed to her that the spirit who visited her at "The Pot" visibly frowned, and the great eyes were full of reproach.

What was this feeble earthly glory to that which was offered to her in the sky? She had chosen wrongly, contrary to the spirit of the proud and ambitious Lechesters; she was acting in opposition to the traditions of her race. Marese, after all, was a low-born upstart. The ancestry of the spirit had no beginning and no end. Again she hesitated.

About this time there came a letter from Miss Merton, dated Torquay, written in a formal but polite manner, begging to be informed what she had better do with the dog Dando. She did not wish to get rid of him—she had become quite attached to the dog and he to her—but she was not the

actual owner, and she did not like the responsibility of having so valuable an animal with her.

It seemed as if the value of the dog was well known, for at least two deliberate attempts had been made to steal it within a few days. And these attempts had not a little alarmed Miss Merton. To find that her steps were watched and followed by a wild-looking tramp, or tinker fellow, bent upon carrying off the dog was, to say the least, extremely unpleasant.

The man—an ill-looking fellow—was always about the house, and would not go away. He played a tin whistle, and whenever the dog heard some peculiar notes, he became greatly excited, and began to dance about in a curious manner. Not only that, but if the tramp varied the tune in some way, then the dog grew frantic to run after him, and twice she had the utmost difficulty to recover him.

What was she to do? She did not like

to part with the dog, and yet really it was very awkward.

Violet in reply asked Miss Merton to send her Dando. She had now got over her prejudice against him and felt that her anger had been unjust. She should like to have him back again. As to the tramp, she was not surprised, for she remembered that her poor father had bought the dog, when quite young, from a band of strolling gipsies, and there were certain tunes which had always excited him to dance and frisk about as if he had been trained to do so.

Violet, of course, asked Lady Lechester's permission, whose reply was that she should be glad to have the dog; there was plenty of room for him, and he would be company, and add to the safety of the somewhat lonely Towers. Violet herself thought that it would be a great advantage if Dando should happen to please Agnes' fancy; he might be allowed to accompany her in her

lonely dark walks, and would be some protection.

A week afterwards Dando came, and at once recognised Violet. He had grown considerably larger, and was a fine, noble animal.

As Violet had hoped, Agnes took a great fancy to him, and the dog returning it, they became inseparable companions. This relieved Violet of much of her anxiety.

CHAPTER V.

A FORTNIGHT after Dando's establishment at The Towers, Aymer came. He looked ill, pale, and careworn, and at once announced that he had left Mr. Broughton, and was going to London, literally to seek his fortune.

The monotony had at last proved too much for him, and worse than that was the miserable thought that, after all this work and patience, he was no nearer to Violet. Perhaps after ten or fifteen years of unremitting labour, nine-tenths of which time must be spent at a distance from her, he might, if his health lasted and no accident happened, be in receipt of one hundred and fifty pounds per annum; and how much more forward would he be then?

Not all the poverty and restraint of the years upon Wick Farm at World's End, not all the terrible disappointment on the very day when every hope seemed on the point of realisation; nothing could dull his vivid imagination, or make him abate one iota of the future which he had marked out for Violet.

In truth, she wondered why he had never asked her to come to him—to be married and live with him in his humble lodgings at Barnham. She would have been happy and content. But to Aymer the idea was impossible. All the romance of his life was woven around her head; he would not bring her to miserable back rooms, to a confined narrow life in a third-class street. It would have been to admit that his whole being was a failure; that he had formed hopes and dreamed dreams beyond his power ever to grasp, and his spirit was not yet broken to that. No, he would struggle and work, and bear anything for Violet's sake. Anything

but this miserable monotony without progress. Had there been progress, however slow, he might have tamed his impatient mind and forced himself to endure it.

Day after day passed, the nights came and went, and each morning found him precisely in the same position as before. His organisation was too sensitive, too highly wrought, eager, nervous, for the dull plodding of daily life. He chafed against it, till dark circles formed themselves under his eyelids—circles which sleep would not remove. These were partly caused by overwork.

Broughton, on returning from Stirmingham, found his affairs at Barnham had got into a fearful state of muddle, and Aymer had to assist him to clear the Augean stable of accumulated correspondence, and satisfy neglected clients. Often, after a long day's work, he had to carry accounts or correspondence home with him and finish it there, and then after that he would open

his own plain simple desk—much such a desk as the one that had belonged to poor Cornet De Warren—and resume his interrupted MS.

After awhile it became unbearable; the poor fellow grew desperate. He might not have so soon given way, had not a slight attack of illness, not sufficient to confine him in-doors, added to the tension of his nerves. He determined to stay on until his MS. was finished—till the last word had been written, and the last sketch elaborated—then he would go to London, no matter what became of him. If all else failed he could, at the last, return to Wick Farm; they would give him a bed and a crust, and he would be no worse off than before.

He toiled at his book at midnight, and long hours afterwards, when the good people of Barnham town were calmly sleeping the sleep of the just, and permitting the talent in their midst to eat its own heart. At last it was finished, and he left.

Mr. Broughton wished him to stay, offered to increase his salary, said that he had become really useful, and even, as a personal favour, begged him to remain. Aymer thanked him sincerely, but was firm —he must go. So far as was possible he explained to Broughton the reason, and the lawyer, hard as he was, had sufficient power of understanding others to perceive the real state of affairs. He warned Aymer that certain disappointment awaited him in London, that no publisher would issue a book by an unknown author unless paid for it. Aymer shook his head sadly—he had known that well enough long ago, but he must go.

Broughton shook hands with him, gave him a five-pound note over and above his salary, and told him if in distress, as he prophesied he would certainly soon be, to write to him, or else return.

Aymer again thanked him, packed his modest little portmanteau, and taking with

him his manuscript, went to The Towers to say farewell to Violet.

When Agnes understood the course he had decided on, she said that she thought he had done right. To any other she should have said differently; to any other of a less highly organised mind she should have said, "Why, you cannot find a better opening." But what would have been meat to others was poison to Aymer. Therefore she applauded his resolution, and told him to go forth and conquer, but first to stay a few days with Violet.

This language greatly cheered poor Aymer, and for a few days he was in a species of Paradise.

It was not even yet fully spring—the wind was cold at times, but still they could go out freely; and with Violet at his side, and Dando bounding along in front, it seemed almost like a return to the old joyous times at World's End.

The hours flew by, and when the last

day came it seemed as if but a few minutes had elapsed. It happened to be a wet day—the spring showers were falling steadily, and, unable to go out, they rambled into the old mansion, and strolled from room to room.

The groom had been ordered to get the dog-cart out by a certain time to take Aymer seven miles to the nearest railway station. That station was but a small one, and two up-trains only stopped there in the course of the day—if he missed this he would not reach London that night.

Forgetful of time, perhaps half purposely forgetful, Aymer lingered on, and could not tear himself away.

At length the groom, tired of waiting in the rain, and anxious about the time, waived all ceremony, and came to seek his passenger.

Aymer pressed Violet's hand, kissed it, and was gone, not daring to look back.

The wheels grated on the gravel, and Violet remained where he had left her.

Agnes came presently and found her, and started. The farewell had been given in the Blue Room.

"You did not say farewell here?" said Agnes, with emphasis.

Violet admitted it.

"Good Heavens—what an evil omen!" muttered Agnes, and drew her from the spot.

From that very room De Warren had gone forth to his fate: from that room Aymer had started to win himself a way in the world.

It was late at night when he reached London. Nothing could be done till the morning. As he had no experience of the ways of the metropolis, Aymer naturally paid about half as much again as was necessary, and reckoning up his slender stock of money, foresaw that he could not long remain in town at this rate.

Mr. Broughton had given him a written introduction to a firm of law-publishers and stationers with whom he dealt—not that

they would be of any use to him in themselves, but in the idea that they might have connections who could serve him.

Upon these gentlemen he waited in the morning, and was fairly well received. They gave him a note to another firm who were in a more popular line of business. Aymer trudged thither, and found these people very off-handed and very busy. They glanced at his manuscript—not in their line. Had he anything that would be likely to take with boys?—illustrated fiction sold best for boys and girls. Ah, well! they were sorry and very busy. Suppose he tried so-and-so?

This process, or pretty much the same process, was repeated for two or three days, until poor Aymer, naturally enough, lost heart.

As he left one publisher's shop, a clerk, who was writing at his desk near the door, noticed his careworn look, and having once gone through a somewhat similar experi-

ence, and seeing "gentleman" marked upon his features, asked him if he would show him the work.

Aymer did so. The clerk, an experienced man, turned over the illustrations carefully, and then appeared to ponder.

"These are good," he said; "they would certainly take if they were published. But so also would a great many other things. The difficulty is to get them published, unless you have a name. Now take my advice—It is useless carrying the MS. from door to door. You may tramp over London without success. Your best plan will be to bring it out at your own cost; once out you will get a reputation, and then you can sell your next. I don't want to be personal, but have you any money? I see—you have a little. Well, you need not pay all the cost. Go to so-and-so—offer them, let me see, such-and-such a sum, and not a shilling more, and your business is done."

Aymer, as he walked along busy Fleet Street and up into the Strand, thought over this advice, and it sounded reasonable enough—too reasonable. For he had so little money. When all he had saved from the gift of fifty pounds, his salary, and Broughton's present, were added together, he had but forty-seven pounds. Out of this he was advised to expend forty pounds in one lump; to him it seemed like risking a fortune. But Violet? His book? He could not help, even after all his disappointments, feeling a certain faith in his book.

Westwards he walked, past the famous bronze lions, and the idea came into his mind—How did the hero of Trafalgar win his fame? Was it not by courage only—simple courage? On, then. He went to the firm mentioned. They haggled for a larger sum; but Aymer was firm, for the simple reason that he had no more to give. Then they wanted a few days to consider.

This he could not refuse; and these days passed slowly, while his stock of money diminished every hour. Finally they agreed to publish the work, but bound him down to such conditions, that it was hard to see how he could recover a tenth part of his investment, much less obtain a profit. He signed the agreement, paid the money, and walked forth.

He went up the steps to the National Gallery, barely knowing what he did. He stood and gazed down upon the great square, with the lions and the fountains, and the busy stream of human life flowing for ever round it. A proud feeling swelled up within. At last his book would be seen and read, his name would be known, and then——Violet!

Days and weeks went by, and yet no proofs came to his humble lodgings, or rather sleeping place, for all day he wandered to and fro in the great city. When he called at the publishers' office they

treated him with supercilious indifference, and—"Really did not know that the immediate appearance of the little book was so important." There were other works they had had in hand previously, and which must have priority.

Aymer wandered about, not only into the great thoroughfares and the famous streets of the City and West End, but eastwards down to the docks, filled with curiosity, observing everything, storing his mind with facts and characteristics for future use, and meantime starving—for it was rapidly coming to that; and the descent was facilitated by a misfortune which befell him in Shoreditch, where, as he was standing near a passage or court in a crowd, a thief made off with three pounds out of his remaining five.

It is easy to say—Why did not Aymer get work? But how was he to do so with no money to advertise, no introductions, no kind of security to give, a perfect

stranger? He did try. He called upon some firms who advertised in the *Telegraph*. The very first question was—Where do you come from? The country! That answer was sufficient. They wanted a man up to London work and to the ways of the City. Aymer modestly said he could learn. "Yes," they replied, "and we must pay for your education. Good morning."

Economise as much as he would, the two pounds left dwindled and dwindled, till the inevitable end came, and the last half sovereign melted into five shillings, the five shillings into half-a-crown, the half-a-crown into a single solitary shilling. Driven to the last extremity, Aymer hit upon the idea of manual labour. He was not a powerful man, he could not lift a heavy weight, but he could bear a great deal of fatigue. He looked round him, he saw hundreds at work, and yet there did not seem any place where he could go and ask for employment.

By a kind of instinct he wandered down to the river and along the wharves. There he saw men busy unloading the barges and smaller craft. Summoning up courage, he spoke to one of the labourers, who stared, and then burst into a broad grin. Aymer turned away, but was called back. The ganger looked him up and down and offered him half-a-crown a day; the others earned three shillings and sixpence and four shillings, but they were strong, strapping fellows. Aymer accepted it, for indeed he could not help himself, and in a few minutes the poet, author, artist, with his coat off, was rolling small casks across the wharf. At first he was awkward, and hurt himself; the rest laughed at him, but good-humouredly. Some offered him beer.

At six o'clock he, with the rest, was called to a small office and received his day's wages—two shillings and sixpence. He made a meal, the first that day, at a cheap

eating-house, and then set out to return to his wretched lodgings, tired, worn out, miserable, yet not despairing, for he had found a means which would enable him to live, and to wait—to wait till the book came out.

For a fortnight Aymer worked at the wharf, and had become a favourite with the men. Noting his handiness and activity, and seeing that he was well educated, he was now put into an office of some little trust, to check the goods as they were landed, and received an advance of eighteenpence, making a daily wage of four shillings. This seemed an immense improvement; but he was obliged to borrow a week's extra salary in advance to buy a new pair of boots, and was therefore very little better off.

Strolling slowly one evening up Cannon Street, Aymer met the great stream of city men and merchants, clerks and agents, which at that time pours out of the warehouses

and offices, setting across London Bridge towards the suburbs.

He walked slowly, all but despondently. It was already a week since he had written to Violet—that in itself was a strong proof of his condition of mind. It is very easy for those who have got everything, to pray each Sunday against envy, and to repeat with unction the response after the command not to covet thy neighbour's goods. It is a different matter when one is practically destitute, when the mere value of the chain that hangs so daintily from my lady's neck—ay, the price of the muff that warms her delicate hands—would be as a fortune, and lift the heart up out of the mire.

He could not help thinking that if he had but the money, the value, of a single much-despised pony that drew a greengrocer's cart he should be almost a prince.

He passed under Temple Bar, and entered the busy Strand, walking, as it hap-

pened—events always happen, and no one can say what that word really means—on the right hand pavement, facing westwards. Painfully and wearily walking, he came to the church where the pavement makes a detour, and hesitated for a moment whether to cross to the other side or go round the church, and decided, as the road was dirty, and his old boots thin and full of holes, to follow the pavement. "Circumstances over which we have no control"—these circumstances generally commence in the smallest, least noticeable trifles. It so happened—there it is again—will anyone explain why it so happened?—that as he reached the entrance to Holywell Street, he glanced up it, and saw for the first time that avenue of old books. The author's instinct made him first pause, and then go up it—he was tired, but he must go and look. Dingy and dirty, but tempting to a man whose library had been obtained by wiring hares. He thought, with a sigh,

how many more books he could have bought with his money had he known of the existence of this cheap mart, or had he had any access to it. Here was Bohn's Plato —for which he had paid a hardly-got thirty shillings—marked up at fifteen shillings, slightly soiled it was true, but what did that matter? Here was old Herodotus—Bohn's —marked at eighteenpence, the very book which had cost him three hares, including carriage. The margins were all scribbled over—odd faces and odder animals rudely sketched in pen and ink, evidently some schoolboy's crib. But what did that matter, so long as the text was complete—he cared for nothing but the text. As he lingered and heard the bells chiming seven o'clock, his eye caught sight of a little book called "A Fortune for a Shilling."

It was a catching title; he remembered seeing it lying upon the itinerant book-seller's stall in front of the Sternhold Hall. He looked at it, weighed it in his hand.

He smiled sadly at his own folly. He had but fifteenpence in his pocket, and to think of throwing a whole shilling away upon such a lottery! It was absurd—childish; and yet the book fascinated him. The bookseller's assistant came out, ostensibly to dust the books—really to see that none were pocketed. Aymer ran his eye down the pages of the book, feeling all the while as if he were cheating the bookseller of his money. The assistant said, "Only one shilling, sir; a chance for everybody, sir, in that book." Aymer shut his eyes to his own folly, paid the money, and returned into the Strand with threepence left.

CHAPTER VI.

HE repented his folly very speedily, for the landlady had advanced him half-a-crown two days before for some necessaries, and now asked him for the money.

Not all the hunger and thirst of downright destitution is so hard to bear to a proud spirit as the insults of a petty creditor. He could not taste his tea; the dry bread—he could not afford butter—stuck in his throat. If he had not spent that shilling, he might have paid a part at least of his debt.

He took up the book—the cause of his depression—and, still ashamed of himself, began to search it for any reference to his own name. In vain; Malet was not

mentioned, there were no unclaimed legacies, no bank dividends accumulating, no estates without an owner waiting for him to take possession—it was an absolute blank. The shilling had been utterly wasted.

As he sat thinking over his position, the idea occurred to him to see what mention the book made of the great estate at Stirmingham.

There were pages upon pages devoted to Sibbolds and Baskettes, just as he expected. Aymer ran down the list, recalling, as he went, the scenes he had witnessed in the Sternhold Hall.

At the foot of one page was a short note in small type, and a name which caught his eye—"Bury Wick Church." He read it—it stated that it was uncertain what had become of Arthur Sibbold, the heir by the entail, and that inquiries had failed to elucidate his fate. There was a statement, made on very little authority, that he had been buried in Bury Wick Church, co.

B——, but researches there had revealed nothing. Either he had died a pauper, and had been interred without a tombstone, or else *he had changed his name.* It was this last sentence that in an instant threw a flood of light, as it were, into Aymer's mind—*changed his name.*

Full of excitement, he rushed to his little portmanteau, tore out his note-book, and quickly found the memorandum made in the office of Mr. Broughton, at Barnham.

There was the explanation of the disappearance of Arthur Sibbold—there was the advertisement in a small local newspaper of his intended marriage and change of name. Doubtless he had afterwards been known as Mr. Waldron—had been buried as Waldron, and his death registered as Waldron. As Waldron of The Place, World's End! Then poor old Jason Waldron, the kindest man that ever lived, was in reality the true heir to the vast estate at Stirmingham.

Jason was dead, but Violet remained. Violet was the heiress. He sat, perfectly overwhelmed with his own discovery, of which he never entertained a moment's doubt. He ransacked his memory of what he had heard at the family council; tried to recall the evidence that had been produced at that memorable *fiasco;* but found it hard to do so, for at the time his mind was far away with Violet, and he had no personal interest in the proceedings. Had he only known—what an opportunity he would have had—he might have learnt the smallest particulars.

Thinking intently upon it, it seemed to him that the name of Arthur Sibbold was rarely, if ever, mentioned at that conference, it was always *James* Sibbold; Arthur seemed to have dropped out of the list altogether.

If he could read a copy of the "Life of Sternhold Baskette," perhaps he might be able to get a better understanding of the facts.

He deeply regretted now that he had not purchased a copy, as he might have done so easily at Stirmingham, on the stall of the itinerant bookseller. Then he had a little money; now he had none.

He called his landlady, took up his great coat, and gave it to her—could she sell it? She looked it over, found many faults, but finally went out with it. In half an hour she returned with eighteen shillings.

Aymer had given three pounds for it just before his wedding-day. He paid the old lady her half-crown, and hurried back to Holywell Street. The book he wanted, however, was not so easily to be found. All had heard of it—but no one had it.

In time he was directed to a man who dealt in genealogical works, sold deeds, autographs, and similar trash. Here he found the book, and had a haggle for it, finally securing it for seven shillings and sixpence; the fellow would have been glad of three shillings, for it had been on his

shelves for years, but Aymer was burning with impatience. In the preface he found a scanty account of the Sibbolds, not one-fifth as much as he had reckoned upon, for the book was devoted to Sternhold, the representative man of the Baskettes. There was, however, a pretty accurate narrative of the murder of Will Baskette, and from that Aymer incidentally obtained much that he wanted. Reflecting upon the murder, and trying to put himself in Arthur Sibbold's place, Aymer arrived at a nearly perfect conception of the causes which led him to bury himself, as it were, out of sight.

One of two things was clear—either Arthur Sibbold had actually participated in the murder, and was afraid of evidence unexpectedly turning up against him; or else he had been deeply hurt with the suspicion that was cast upon him, and had resolved for ever to abandon the home of his ancestors.

Probably he had travelled as far as possible from the scene of the murder—perhaps to London (this was the case)—got employment, and, being successful, finally married into the Waldron family, and changed his name. He would naturally be reticent about his ancestors. The next generation would forget all about it, and the third would never think to inquire.

Had the vast estate been in existence before Arthur Sibbold's death, most probably he would have made himself known; but it was clear that it had not grown to one-fiftieth part of its present magnificence till long after.

The silence of Arthur Sibbold, and Arthur Sibbold's descendant, was thus readily and reasonably accounted for. Reading further, Aymer came to the bargain which Sternhold Baskette had made with the sons of James Sibbold, and of their transhipment to America. Here the legal knowledge that he had picked up in the office of Mr.

Broughton enabled him to perceive several points that would not otherwise have occurred to him. That transaction was obviously null and void, if at the time it was concluded either Arthur Sibbold, or Arthur Sibbold's descendants, were living. They were the lawful owners of the old farm at Wolf's Glow, and of the Dismal Swamp, and it was impossible for James Sibbold's children to transfer the estate to another person. All then that it was necessary to prove was that Violet was the direct descendant of Arthur Sibbold, and her claim would be at once irresistible. Then it occurred to him that at the family council he had often heard mention made of a certain deed of entail which was missing, and for which the members of the Sibbold detachment had offered large sums of money.

The long, long hours and days that he had spent in the Sternhold Hall chronicling the proceedings of the council, and which he had at the time so heartily hated

soon proved of the utmost value. He could at once understand what was wanted, and perceive the value of the smallest link of evidence. Here was one link obviously wanting—the deed. Without that deed the descent of Violet from Arthur Sibbold was comparatively of small account. It was possible that even then she might be a co-heiress; but without that deed—which specially included female heiresses—she would not be able to claim the entire estate. Yet even then, as the direct descendant of the elder brother, her claim would be extremely valuable, and far more likely to succeed than the very distant chance of the American Sibbolds or Baskettes, all of whom laboured under the disadvantage that their forefathers had sold their birthright for a mess of pottage. Another and far more serious difficulty which occurred to him as he thought over the matter, far into the night, was the absence of proof of Arthur Sibbold's marriage. It was clear from the

little book whose notes had opened his eyes, that the register of the church at Bury Wick, World's End, had been searched, and no record found. His memorandum of the advertisement of change of name described Arthur Sibbold as of Middlesex; the marriage therefore might have taken place in London. Probably Sibbold had met the Miss Waldron he had afterwards married in town. Where then was he to find the register of marriage? Middlesex was a wide definition. How many churches were there in Middlesex? What a Herculean labour to search through them all!

He was too much excited to sleep. Despite of all these drawbacks—the disappearance of the deed, and the absence of the marriage certificate—there was no reasonable doubt that Violet was the heiress of the Stirmingham estates. The difficulties that were in the way appeared to him as nothing; he would force his way through them. She should have her rights—and

then! He would search every church in London till he did find the register of Arthur Sibbold's marriage. It must be in existence somewhere. If it was in existence he would find it. Towards two o'clock in the morning he fell asleep, and, as a result, did not wake till ten next day. Hurrying to his daily task, he was met with frowns and curses for neglect, and venturing to remonstrate, was discharged upon the spot.

Here seemed an end at once to all his golden dreams. He walked back into the City, and passing along Fleet Street, was stopped for a moment by a crowd of people staring into the window of a print and bookshop, and talking excitedly. A momentary curiosity led him to press through the crowd, till he could obtain a view of the window. There he saw—wonder of wonders—one of his own sketches, an illustration from his book, greatly enlarged, and printed in colours. It was this that had attracted the crowd. The humour and

yet the pathos of the picture—the touch of Nature which makes the whole world kin—had gone straight to their hearts. On every side he heard the question, "Whose is it?"—"Who drew it?"—"What's the artist's name?" Then the title of the book was repeated, and "Who's it by?"—"Who wrote it?"—"I'll get a copy! Third Edition already—it must be good."

Gratified, wonder-stricken, proud, and yet bewildered, Aymer at last got into the shop and made inquiries. Then he learnt that the publisher had stolen a march upon him. They had never sent him the proofs; they had in fact thought very little of the book, till one day it happened (it happened again) a famous artist came into the office, and chanced to turn over a leaf of the MS., which was lying where Aymer had left it, on the publisher's wide desk. This man had a world-wide reputation, and feared no competitor; he could therefore do justice to others. He was greatly struck with the sketches.

"This man will make his fortune," he said. "Why on earth do you let the book lie here mouldering?"

The publisher said nothing, but next day the manuscript was put in hand, hurried out, and well advertised. The first and second edition sold out in a week, and Aymer heard nothing of it till accident led him into the crowd round the shop window in Fleet Street.

It will be pardoned if I say that Aymer was prouder that day than ever he had been in his life. He went straight to the publisher's with a glowing heart. The agreement had been that the publisher should have two editions for his trouble and the use of his name; in the third, the author and artist was to share. In point of fact, the publisher had never dreamt of the book reaching even a second edition.

Aymer was received coldly. He asked for his share. Impossible—the booksellers had not paid yet—the expense had been

enormous—advertising, &c., there would barely be a balance when all was said and done. Aymer lost his temper as well he might, and was very politely requested to leave the premises. He did so, but hastened at once to his adviser—the clerk who had told him to publish at his own risk. This man, or rather gentleman, said he had expected him for days, and wondered why he had not come.

"Wait till one o'clock," said he, "and I will accompany you."

At one they revisited the offices of the publisher. The upshot was that Aymer was presented with a cheque for fifty pounds, being his own forty pounds, and ten pounds additional.

"Now," said his friend, "you call on my employers—I will mention your name—and offer them a work you have in hand."

Aymer did so, and obtained a commission to write a work for them, to be illustrated by himself, and was presented with

a twenty-pound note as earnest-money. Thus in a few hours, from a penniless outcast, he found himself with seventy pounds in his pocket—with a name, and with a prospect of constant and highly remunerative employment. If this continued, and of course it would—not all his disappointments could quench his faith in his destiny—he would marry Violet almost immediately. With this money he could search out, and establish her claim; he would employ her own late employer, Mr. Broughton. He was anxious to write to Violet, but he had not tasted food that day yet. He entered a restaurant and treated himself to a really good dinner, with a little of the generous juice of the grape. Towards five o'clock he sat himself down in his old room to write to Violet, and to Mr. Broughton.

He wrote and wrote and wrote, and still he could not conclude; his heart was full, and he knew that there was a loving

pair of eyes which would read every line with delight. First about his book—sending, of course, two copies by the same post—one for Violet, one for Lady Lechester—telling Violet of the excitement it had caused, of the crowd in the street, of the anxiety to learn the author's name, of the first, second, third edition, and the fourth in the press. Was it to be wondered at that he dilated upon this subject?

Then he told her of his troubles, of his work at the wharf, and explained why he had not written, and finally came to the discovery that Violet was the heiress of Stirmingham. He had a difficult task to explain to her how this arose; he had to review the whole history of the case in as short a compass as possible, and to put the links of evidence clearly, so that a non-technical mind could grasp them. He finished with a declaration of his intention to spare neither trouble, time, nor expense to establish Violet's right; he

would search every church register in London; she should ride in her carriage yet. If only poor Jason had been alive to rejoice in all this!

This was the same man, remember, who not many weeks before had written to Violet from Stirmingham in the midst of the turmoil of the election, expressing his deep sense of the responsibility that must of necessity fall upon the owner of that marvellous city; he would not be that man for worlds. The self-same man was now intent on nothing less than becoming, through Violet, the very thing he had said he would not be at any price. Still the same omnipotent circumstances over which we have no control, and which can alter cases, and change the whole course of man's nature.

To Broughton he wrote in more business-like style. He could not help triumphing a little after the other's positive prophecy of his failure; he sent him also a copy

of the third edition. But the mass of his letter referred to Violet's claim upon the estate, and went as fully into details as he could possibly do. He referred Mr. Broughton to the number and date of the Barnham newspaper, which contained the advertisement of Arthur Sibbold's change of name. Would Mr. Broughton take up the case?

Who can trace the wonderful processes of the mind, especially when that mind is excited by unusual events, by unusual indulgence, and by a long previous course of hard thinking? That evening Aymer treated himself to the theatre, and saw his beloved Shakspeare performed for the first time. It was *Hamlet*—the greatest of all tragedies. Who can tell? It may be that the intricate course of crime and bloodshed, he had seen displayed upon the stage, had preternaturally excited him; had caused him to think of such things. Perhaps the wine he had taken—a small

quantity indeed, but almost unprecedented for him—had quickened his mental powers. Be it what it might, towards the grey dawn Aymer dreamt a dream—inchoate, wild, frenzied, horrible, impossible to describe. But he awoke with the drops of cold perspiration upon his forehead, with a great horror clinging to him, and he asked himself the question—Who murdered Jason Waldron, true heir to Stirmingham city? His legal knowledge suggested the immediate reply—Those who had an interest and a motive so to do. The man who had an interest was—John Marese Baskette.

There was not a shadow of proof, but Aymer rose that morning weighed down with the firm moral conviction that it was he and no other who had instigated the deed. He recalled to his mind the circumstances of that mysterious crime—a crime which had never been even partially cleared up. He thought of Violet—his

Violet—the next heir. Oh, God! if she were taken too. Should he go down to her at once? No; it was the fancy of his distempered mind. He would conquer it. She was perfectly safe at The Towers; and yet Marese came their sometimes. No; where could she be safer than amid that household and troop of servants? But he wrote and hinted his dark suspicions to her; warned her to be on her guard. This, he said, he was determined upon—he would establish her right, and he would punish the murderer of poor Jason. That very day he had commenced his search among the churches.

CHAPTER VII.

WHEN Aymer's first and longest letter reached The Towers, together with the copy of his book, Violet could hardly contain herself with pleasure. His triumph was her triumph—his fame her fame—and in the excitement of the moment she but barely skimmed the remainder of his letter, and did not realise the fact that she was the heiress to the most valuable property in England. Her faith in Aymer had proved to be well-founded; he had justified her confidence; his genius had conquered every obstacle. As she had read Marese's letters to Agnes, so it was only natural that she should proudly show this letter to her.

Agnes fully sympathised with her, and

declared that the sketches (she had already looked cursorily through the copy of his book which Aymer had sent her) were wonderfully good. But it was natural for her to be less excited than Violet, and therefore it was that the second part of the letter made a greater impression upon her. Violet the heiress of the Stirmingham estate? It was impossible—a marvel undreamt of. Marese was the heir—there could not be two—and in Marese she was personally interested. Together they re-read that portion of Aymer's letter, and wondered and wondered still more. His line of argument seemed laid down with remarkable precision, and there was no escape from his conclusions—but were his premises correct; was he not mistaken in the identity?

The whole thing appeared so strange and *bizarre*, that Agnes said she really thought he must be romancing—drawing on his imagination, as he had in the book she held in her hand.

Violet knew not what to think. She could not doubt Aymer. She warmly defended him, and declared that he was incapable of playing such practical jokes. She had a faint recollection of poor old Jason once telling her that her great-grandfather's name was Sibbold, or something like that—she could not quite be sure of the name. She remembered it, because Jason had instanced it as an example of the long periods of time, that may be bridged by three or four persons' successive memories. He said that his father had conversed with this Sibbold, or Sibald, and *he* again had met in his youth an old man, who had fought at Culloden in '45. If it had not been for that circumstance, the name would have escaped her altogether.

The more Agnes thought of it, the more she inclined to the view that Aymer, overworked and poorly-fed, had become the subject of an hallucination. It was impossible that Marese could lay open claim to be

the heir if this were the case—perfectly impossible. A gentleman of the highest and most sensitive honour like Marese, would at once have renounced all thought of the inheritance; he would have been only eager to make compensation. Why, even Aymer said that the matter had never been mentioned at the family council—surely that was in itself sufficient proof. It was an insult to Marese—to herself—to credit such nonsense. Aymer must be ill—over-excited.

Violet kept silence, with difficulty, from deference to her generous friend; but she read the letter the third time, and it seemed to her that, whether mistaken or not, Aymer had given good grounds for his statement. She was silent, and this irritated Agnes, who had of late been less considerate than was her wont. It seemed as if some inward struggle had warped her nature—as if in vigorously, aggressively defending Marese, she was defending herself.

The incident caused a coolness between them—the first that had sprung up since Violet had been at The Towers. Violet was certainly as free from false pride as Lady Lechester was eaten up with it; but even she could not help dreaming over the fascinating idea that she was the heiress of that vast estate, or at least a part of it. How happy they would be! What books Aymer could write; what countries they could visit together; what pleasures one hundredth part of that wealth would enable them to enjoy! Thinking like this, her mind also became thoroughly saturated with the idea of the Stirmingham estate. Like a vast whirlpool, that estate seemed to have the power of gradually attracting to itself atoms floating at an apparently safe distance, and of engulfing them in the seething waters of contention.

In the morning came Aymer's second letter, imputing the worst of all crimes to Marese Baskette, or to his instigation.

Violet turned pale as she read it. Her lips quivered. All the whole scene passed again before her eyes—the terrible scene in the dining-room, where the wedding breakfast was laid out—the pool of blood upon the carpet—Jason's head lying helplessly against the back of the arm-chair—the ghastly wound upon the brow. Poor girl! Swift events and the change of life, and her interest in Agnes, had in a manner chased away the memory of that gloomy hour. Now it came back to her with full force, and she reproached herself with a too ready forgetfulness—reproached herself with neglecting the sacred duty of endeavouring to discover the murderer. To her, the facts given by Aymer—the interest, the motive—seemed irresistible. Not for a moment did she question his conclusion. She thought of Marese as she had seen him for a few hours: she remembered his start as he heard her name—it was the start of conscious guilt, there was no doubt.

A great horror fell upon her—a horror only less great than had fallen that miserable wedding day. She had been in the presence of her father's murderer—she had eaten at the same table—she had shaken hands with him. Above the loathing and detestation, the hatred and abhorrence, there rose a horror—almost a fear. Next to being in the presence of the corpse, being in the presence of the murderer was most awful. She could not stay at The Towers—she could not remain, when at any hour he might come, with blood upon his conscience if not upon his actual hands—the blood of her beloved and kindly father. A bitter dislike to The Towers fell upon her—a hatred of the place. It seemed as if she had been entrapped into a position, where she was compelled to associate with the one person of all others whom love, duty, religion—all taught her to avoid. She must go—no matter where. She had a little money—the remnant left after all

Jason's debts had been paid—only some fifty pounds, but it was enough. Mr. Merton had sent it to her with a formal note, after the affairs were wound up. At first the idea occurred to her that she would go back and live at The Place which was still hers ; but no, that could not be—she could not, could not live there ; the spirit of the dead would cry out to her from the very walls. She would go to some small village where living was cheap ; where she could take a little cottage ; where her fifty pounds, and the few pounds she received for the rent of the meadow at The Place, would keep her—till Aymer succeeded, and could get her a home. She hesitated to write to him—she half decided to keep her new address a secret ; for she knew that if he understood her purpose he would deprive himself of necessaries to give her luxuries.

That very day she set to work to pack her trunk, pausing at times to ask herself if she should, or should not, tell Lady Agnes

that her lover was a murderer. Well she knew that Agnes would draw herself up in bitter scorn—would not deign even to listen to her—and yet it was wrong to let her go on in the belief that Marese Baskette was the soul of honour. Clearly it was her duty to warn Agnes of the terrible fate which hung over her—to warn her from accepting a hand stained with the blood of an innocent, unoffending man. One course was open to her, and upon that she finally decided—it was to leave a note for Agnes, enclosing Aymer's letter.

It was Agnes' constant practice to go for a drive about three in the afternoon; Violet usually accompanied her. This day she feigned a headache, and as soon as the carriage was out of sight sent for the groom, and asked him to take her to the railway station.

The man at once got the dog-cart ready, and in half an hour, with her trunk behind

her, Violet was driving along the road. She would not look back—she would not take a last glance at that horrible place. The groom, in a respectful manner, hoped that Miss Waldron was not going to leave them—she had made herself liked by all the servants at The Towers. She said she must, and offered him a crown from her slender store. The man lifted his hat, but refused to take the money.

This incident touched her deeply—she had forgotten that, in leaving The Towers, she might also leave hearts that loved her. The groom wished to stay and get her ticket, but she dismissed him, anxious that he should not know her destination. Two hours afterwards she alighted at a little station, or "road," as it was called. "Belthrop Road" was two and a half miles from Belthrop village; but she got a boy to carry her trunk, and reached the place on foot just before dusk.

On the outskirts of Belthrop dwelt an old

woman who in her youth had lived at World's End, and had carried Violet in her arms many and many a time. She married, and removed to her husband's parish, and was now a widow.

Astonished beyond measure, but also delighted, the honest old lady jumped at Violet's proposal that she should be her lodger. The modest sum per week which Violet offered seemed in that outlying spot a mine of silver. Hannah Bond was only afraid lest her humble cottage should be too small—she had really good furniture for a cottage, having had many presents from the persons she had nursed, and particularly prided herself upon her feather beds. Here Violet found an asylum —quiet and retired, and yet not altogether uncomfortable. Her only fear was lest Aymer should be alarmed, and she tried to devise some means of assuring him of her safety, without letting him know her whereabouts.

Circumstances over which no one as usual had had any control, made that spring a memorable one in the quiet annals of Belthrop. The great agricultural labourers' movement of the Eastern counties had extended even to this village; a branch of the Union had been formed, meetings held, and fiery language indulged in. The delegate despatched to organise the branch, looked about him for a labourer of some little education to officiate as secretary, and to receive the monthly contributions from the members.

Chance again led him to fix upon poor old Edward Jenkins, the gardener, who still worked for Mr. Albert Herring, doing a man's labour for a boy's pay. The gardener could write and read and cipher; he was a man of some little intelligence, and, though a new comer, the working men regarded him as a kind of "scholar." He was just the very man, for he was a man with a grievance. He very naturally resented

what he considered the harsh treatment he had met with after so many years faithful service, and he equally resented the low pay which circumstances compelled him to put up with. Jenkins became the secretary of the branch, and this did not improve his relations with Albert Herring. Always a harsh and unjust man, his temper of late had been aroused by repeated losses—cattle had died, crops gone wrong; above all, an investment he had made of a thousand pounds of the money that should have been Violet's, in some shares that promised well, had turned out an utter failure. He therefore felt the gradual rise in wages more severely than he would have done, and was particularly sore against the Union. He abused Jenkins right and left, and yet did not discharge him, for Jenkins was a cheap machine. His insults were so coarse and so frequent that the poor old man lost his temper, and so far forgot himself (as indeed he might very easily do) as to hope that the

Almighty would punish his tormentor, and *burn down his house over his head.*

Early in the spring the labourers struck, and the strike extended to Belthrop. The months passed on, the farmers were in difficulty, and meantime the wretched labourers were half-starved. Albert was furious, for he could not get his wheat sown, and upon that crop he depended to meet his engagements. Yet he was the one of all others, at a meeting which was called, to persuade the farmers to hold out; and above all he abused Jenkins, the secretary; called him a traitor, a firebrand, an incendiary. The meeting broke up without result; and it was on that very evening that Violet arrived. The third evening afterwards she was suddenly called out by gossiping old Hannah Bond, who rushed in, in a state of intense excitement—

"Farmer Herring's ricks be all ablaze!"

Violet was dragged out by the old woman, and beheld a magnificent, and yet a sad

sight. Eight and thirty ricks, placed in a double row, were on fire. About half had caught when she came out. As she stood watching, with the glare in the sky reflected upon her face, she saw the flames run along from one to another, till the whole rickyard was one mass of roaring fire. The outbuildings, the stables, and cow-houses, all thatched, caught soon after—finally the dwelling-house.

The farm being situated upon the Downs, the flames and sparks were seen for miles and miles in the darkness of the night, and the glare in the sky still farther. The whole countryside turned out in wonder and alarm; hundreds and hundreds trooped over Down and meadow to the spot. Efforts were made by scores of willing hands to stay the flames—efforts which seemed ridiculously futile before that fearful blast; for with the fire there rose a wind caused by the heated column of air ascending, and the draught was like that of

a furnace. Nothing could have saved the place—not all the engines in London, even had there been water; and the soil being chalky, and the situation elevated, there was but one deep well. As it was, no engine reached the spot till long after the fire was practically over—Barnham engine came in the grey of the morning, having been raced over the hills fully fifteen miles. By that time, all that was left of that noble farmhouse and rickyard, was some two-score heaps of smoking ashes, smouldering and emitting intense heat.

Hundreds upon hundreds stood looking on, and among them there moved dark figures — policemen — who had hastily gathered together.

And where was Albert Herring? Was he ruined? He at that moment recked nothing of the fire. He was stooping—in a lowly cottage at a little distance—over the form of his only son, a boy of ten. The family had easily escaped before the

dwelling-house took fire, and were, to all intents and purposes, safe; but this lad slipped off, as a lad would do, to follow his father, and watch the flames. A burning beam from one of the outhouses struck him down. Albert heard a scream; turned, and saw his boy beneath the flaring, glowing timber. He shrieked—literally shrieked—and tore at the beam with his scorched hands till the flesh came off.

At last the on-lookers lifted the beam. The lad was fearfully burnt—one whole shoulder seemed injured—and the doctors gave no hope of his life. (As I cannot return to this matter, it may be as well to state that he did not die—he recovered slowly, but perfectly.) Yet what must the agony of that man's mind have been while the child lay upon the bed in the lowly cottage? Let the fire roar and hiss, let roof-tree fall and ruin come—life, flickering life more precious than the whole world—only save him this one little life.

In the morning Albert turned like a wild beast at bay, shouting and crying for vengeance. "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord;" but when did man ever hearken to that? He marked out Jenkins, the gardener; he pointed him out to all. That was the man—had they not heard him say he hoped Heaven would burn the farm over his head?

That was true; several had heard it. Jenkins had been the last to leave the premises that night.

The gardener, utterly confounded, could not defend himself. The leader of the Unionists! The police looked grave, and the upshot was he was taken into custody.

Feeling ran high in the neighbourhood, as well it might. There were grievances on both sides, and the great fire had stirred up all uncharitableness. The justices' room was crowded, and a riot was feared. The Union had taken up poor Jenkins' defence, and had sent down a

shrewd lawyer who put a bold face on it, but had little hope in his heart. Suspicion was so strong against the prisoner.

His poor old wife was perhaps even more frenzied than she had been at the coroner's inquest. Such a circumstance as Violet's arrival at Belthrop, though trivial in itself, was, of course, known in the village; she once again rushed to Violet for help. Violet, though anxious to keep quiet, could not resist the appeal, she was herself much excited and upset about the matter. She went with the miserable wife to the Court, and being a lady, was accommodated with a good seat. Out of her little stock she would have willingly paid for a lawyer, but that was unnecessary. The counsel retained by the Union was a clever man; but he could make no head against the unfortunate facts, and in his anxiety to save the prisoner he made one great mistake—justifiable perhaps—but a mistake. He asked who would profit by the fire, whose interest was

it? Was not hard cash better than ricks, and an uncertain and falling market? In a word, he hinted that Albert himself had fired the ricks.

A roar of denial rose from the farmers present, a deafening cheer from the labourers. It was with difficulty that the crowd was silenced, and when the proceedings were resumed, it was easy to see that the Bench had been annoyed by this remark.

The solicitor on the other side got up, and asked the justices to consider the previous character of this man the prisoner—who had been on his trial for murder—was there a single person who would speak to his good character?

"Yes," said Violet, standing up. Amid intense surprise she was sworn. "My name is Violet Waldron," she said, nerving herself to the effort. "I am the daughter of—of—the person who was—you understand me? I have known this man for

years—since I was a child. He and his served us faithfully for two generations. He is incapable of such a crime—I believe him innocent—he is a good man, but most unfortunate."

She could not go further, her courage broke down. They did not cross-examine her.

The prosecution professed great respect for Miss Waldron, whose misfortunes were well known, but of what value was her testimony in this case? She had not even seen Jenkins for a long time; circumstances warped the best of natures.

The end was, that Jenkins was committed for trial at the assizes within two months. Thus did circumstances again involve this victim of fate in an iron net. Here again I must anticipate. Jenkins was sentenced at the assizes to twelve months imprisonment with hard labour. Nevertheless the imputation against Albert Herring was never quite forgotten; to this day the poor

believe it, and even the police shake their heads. At all events he profited largely by it. The corn had been kept in the hope that the markets would rise, but they had fallen. The insurance-money saved him from irretrievable ruin.

The prisoner's poor wife was reduced to utter beggary. Violet did her best to keep her, but she could not pay the debts the gardener, with his miserable pay, had of necessity contracted. Ten pounds still remained unpaid. At last the poor woman bethought her of an ancient treasure, an old bible;—would Miss Violet buy it? It really was Violet's—it had been lent by Violet's grandmother to the poor woman, and never returned. Violet at once remembered Lady Lechester's fancy for such books, and recommended her to take it to The Towers. The woman went, and returned with the money.

Now, the immediate effect upon our history of this fire was that Violet Waldron

became a prominent name in the local paper published at Barnham, and that local paper had been taken for years regularly at The Towers. And at The Towers at that time Theodore Marese was temporarily staying, under circumstances that will shortly appear.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN Lady Lechester returned from her drive and learnt with intense surprise that Violet was gone, her first thought was that she had been hurt by the remarks made upon Aymer's hallucination the previous evening. Agnes reproached herself for her momentary irritation; but when she found a note for her from Violet on her dressing-table, and had read both it and the enclosed letter from Aymer, her anger was thoroughly aroused.

Not unnaturally she took it in the worst sense, and looked upon it as a downright insult. To pretend that a gentlemen of Marese's position and character was not the heir that he affirmed himself to be—that he had wooed her under false pretences—that

was bad taste enough, and utterly unjustifiable. Still, it might have passed as the hallucination of an over-tasked mind. But to deliberately accuse the same gentleman of the blackest crime it was possible for human beings to commit, was inexcusable.

All the pride of her nature rose up in almost savage resentment. Her first impulse was to tear up the letters and burn them; but this she refrained from doing, for on second thoughts they might be instrumental in obtaining the punishment of the slanderer. It was all the more bitter, because she felt that she had done her best both for Aymer and Violet, and the latter she had really loved. Certainly Agnes was far too proud and high-minded to regret for one moment a single shilling that she had spent for the benefit of others; but the reflection of Violet's ingratitude did add a sharper sting. Agnes was in truth touched in her tenderest place —her pride:—she engaged, or partially

engaged to a pretender, and worse than that, to a murderer—a Lechester, impossible!

Before she had decided what to do, Mr. Broughton arrived from Barnham, bringing with him Aymer's letter to him. He was utterly unprepared for the mood in which he found Agnes, and unwittingly added fuel to the fire by saying that he had searched the file of old newspapers, and found the very advertisement mentioned by Aymer.

Lady Agnes' indignation knew no bounds. She reproached him for even so much as daring to investigate the matter—for deeming it possible that anything of the kind could be. Let him leave the house immediately—she regretted that she had demeaned herself so much as to admit him to see her.

This aroused Mr. Broughton—who was not without his professional pride—and he answered rather smartly, that Lady Lechester seemed to be forgetting the very dignity to

which she laid claim; and added that if he should mention Aymer's discovery to the building society in Stirmingham, who were his clients, *they* at least would think Miss Waldron's claim one well worth supporting. With this parting shot he bowed and left the room.

No sooner was he gone, than Agnes took up her pen and wrote direct to Marese Baskette, enclosing Aymer's second letter—which accused Marese of being the instigator of the murder—and giving the fullest particulars she could remember of his first—relating to Violet's claim. She did not forget to describe her interview with Mr. Broughton, nor to mention his threat of the building society taking the matter up. She assured him that she looked upon the matter as a hoax and an insult; and only related the story to him in order that he might take the proper proceedings to punish the author of the calumny.

This letter reached Marese at his club

in London, and, hardened man that he was, it filled him with well-founded alarm. Till that moment he had believed that no one on earth was aware of the Waldron claims but himself and Theodore, who had learnt it from perusal of his father Aurelian's papers. As for any one suspecting him of complicity in the death of Jason Waldron, he had never dreamt that detection was possible.

If ever a crime was managed skilfully, that had been; and as to the old story that "murder will out," it was of course an exploded superstition. Had it been Aymer alone who was on his track, he would not so much have cared; but Aymer had not kept the secret to himself: he had written to a lawyer, giving his proofs; the lawyer had verified one of them, at least, and Marese well knew what lawyers were. Then there was the threat of the building society, just as he was on the point of making a favourable composition with

them, and was actually to receive a surrender of some part of the property in a few weeks' time. He appreciated the full force of Broughton's remark, repeated by Lady Agnes, that the building society, his client, would be sure to support Violet Waldron's claim. Of course they would. A fresh litigation would be set on foot, and possession of the estate indefinitely delayed; if that was delayed, his marriage with Lady Lechester would be also thrown back.

Yet despite all these serious reflections, Marese would have made comparatively light of the matter had it not been for the accusation of crime—for the fact that Aymer had obtained a faint glimpse of the truth. He was not the man to hesitate one moment at crime, or to regret it after it was done; but he dreaded detection, as well he might, for from the height to which he had risen, and was about to rise, his fall would be great indeed. He smiled

at Lady Agnes' suggestion that he should prosecute Aymer for libel or slander. Prosecute him in open court, and at once fix ten thousand eyes upon that dark story; perhaps bring a hundred detectives, eager to hunt out the secrets of a rich man, upon his track! That would be folly indeed.

Aymer must be silenced, and Violet removed; but not like that. The first thing he did was to telegraph for Theodore, who came up by the express from Stirmingham.

They had a long and anxious consultation. Theodore persuaded Marese to go at once to The Towers to see Agnes and deny the imputation—to secure her, in fact. Marese thought that this would hardly do; he knew Agnes better than Theodore. She would think that he had put himself out unnecessarily, that he had taken it too greatly to heart, and would simply ask him why he had not

at once instituted legal proceedings against Aymer.

In his secret heart of hearts, Marese did not care to visit that neighbourhood more often than was absolutely necessary. And he really did think that Agnes' transcendent pride would be better suited if he treated the matter in an off-hand way, and dispatched only an agent to represent him—a species of ambassador. Another reason was that Broughton, if he was on the watch, would take Marese's visit to The Towers as a proof that there was something in it, else why should he be so anxious to deny it?

Theodore was willing to go, and he did not long delay his departure. "For all the time that we waste in thinking," said Marese, "this fellow, Malet, is at work. It will take him some time to search all the London churches; but it may so happen that he may hit upon the very entry he wants at the first church chance leads him to."

There was no time to be lost. Very probably Aymer himself, of whose whereabouts in London they were quite ignorant, might go down to The Towers expecting to see his affianced, Violet. Theodore might meet him there, and——.

Above all things, Theodore was to so work upon Lady Agnes' mind as to turn this apparent disadvantage to a real good, and use it to precipitate the marriage. Could not she be brought to see that her proudest course would be to marry Marese, in despite of all these foul calumnies, at once, in defiance? It would be difficult for Marese to put this himself, but his agent could do so.

Theodore went to The Towers, and it fell out much as Marese had foreseen. Agnes was gratified. Theodore said that Marese looked upon the whole affair with the deepest contempt, and disdained to proceed. The hallucination of that unfortunate young man, Aymer, would prove in itself sufficient

punishment for him. Marese desired no vengeance upon a poverty-stricken youth whose brains were not very clear. Then he delicately hinted at a more immediate marriage, and saw with satisfaction that Agnes did not resent the idea, but seemed to ponder over it.

But where was Violet? She had left The Towers, and no one there knew her place of abode.

This disturbed Theodore. He wished to know what the enemy was doing; if he could foresee their designs, then Marese was safe, because they could be outwitted. It was awkward to have these persons working against them in the dark—*i.e.*, Violet, Aymer, and Broughton.

Violet had left no address. Agnes remembered Aymer's, but Theodore found on secret inquiry that he had moved. He waited at The Towers in the hope that Malet might come. Being a man of versatile talent, and clever in conversation,

Lady Agnes was pleased with him, and invited him to stay as long as was convenient.

While Theodore was at The Towers, the great fire happened at Belthrop, and the flames were visible from the upper windows of the mansion, where Lady Agnes, Theodore, and the servants watched them with interest.

Shortly afterwards the Barnham paper was published, with a special account of the preliminary examination of the supposed incendiary, poor Jenkins, before the justices, and Theodore came across the name of Violet Waldron. In this way he learnt that one of the parties, and the most important, was at that moment living in an obscure village, not much more than fifteen miles distant.

He was preparing to pay a visit to Belthrop—ostensibly to see the ruins of the fire—when Aymer Malet arrived at The Towers.

His coming was very natural. He could

not understand why he did not hear from Violet. He had written to her fully twenty times, addressing his letters to The Towers, and had received no answer. This greatly alarmed him, and he resolved to go down and see her. All these letters were meantime at the General Post Office in London.

Lady Agnes, determined to cut off every connection with Malet and Violet, had given the servants strict orders not to take in any letters addressed to either of them. Aymer's letters, therefore, went back to the local post-office, and from thence to London, and doubtless in due time they would have returned to him.

When he found himself with seventy pounds in his pocket, he had taken a better lodging, having previously written to Violet to apprise her of his removal, but as she never had his letter, her note to him was delivered at the old address, and Aymer's old landlady, irritated at his leaving her, coolly put it on the fire.

Violet had only written once, for she too was astonished, and a little hurt, because Aymer did not write to her, and in addition, she had been much disturbed by the great fire and the trial of poor Jenkins. The upshot was, that Aymer leaving his monotonous labour in the London churches, took train and came down to the nearest station to The Towers.

Never doubting his reception, he drove up to the mansion, and was surprised beyond measure when the servants, respectfully and regretfully, but firmly announced that Lady Lechester would not see him. Where was Miss Waldron? Miss Waldron had left—the newspaper said she was at Belthrop, but that was a day or two ago.

Bewildered, and not a little upset, Aymer mechanically turned on his heel—he had dismissed his fly at the park gates—and set out to walk to Belthrop. He had almost reached that very little wicket-gate where Lady Lechester had met the apparition of

Cornet De Warren, when he heard a voice calling his name, and saw a gentleman hastily following him. It was Theodore, who had requested the servants, and enforced his request by a bribe, to at once inform him when Mr. Malet called.

Theodore had a difficult task before him; but he approached it with full confidence in himself. Without a moment's delay he introduced himself as Marese Baskette's cousin, and at once noted the change that passed over Aymer's countenance. Ah!—then Mr. Malet was aware of the previous intimacy that had existed between him and Mr. Baskette? That intimacy was now at an end. He frankly admitted that he had come to The Towers in the interest of Marese; but upon his arrival he had heard, to his intense surprise, of Mr. Malet's discovery of the Waldron claim. To him that claim appeared indisputable: he had written as much to Mr. Baskette, and the consequence was a quarrel. They had

parted: and he was now endeavouring to persuade Lady Lechester to break off her association with that man.

He had heard with great interest the career of Mr. Malet—he had seen his book; and while he regretted his misfortunes, he rejoiced that circumstances enabled him to offer Mr. Malet a most lucrative and remunerative post—a post that would at once give him ease and leisure to promote his literary labours; which would supply him with funds to continue his researches into the Waldron claims—and perhaps to bring the guilty to justice; which would even — this in a delicate manner — it would even permit of an immediate union with Miss Waldron.

Further, as this post was in the city of Stirmingham, Mr. Malet would be on the very spot, and within easy reach of London. The only difficulty was that it required Mr. Malet's immediate presence in Stirmingham, as it would be necessary to fill the

place at once. Probably from the direction of Mr. Malet's steps he was on his way to visit Belthrop, and to congratulate the truly heroic Miss Waldron upon her gallant attempt to save an innocent man from punishment. At the same time, perhaps, Mr. Malet would really serve Miss Waldron's interest better by at once proceeding to Stirmingham that very afternoon with Theodore.

What was this post? Mr. Malet had been in Stirmingham, and was aware that he (Theodore) had inherited a very large asylum for the insane there. As he was himself averse to the science of the mind, he had rarely resided on his property, but left the chief management to a physician, and the accounts to a secretary. His secretary had left about a month ago, and the affairs were in much confusion. He had great pleasure in offering Mr. Malet the place. The salary was seven hundred and fifty pounds per annum, and residence.

This residence was sufficiently large for a married man.

Aymer modestly objected that he was hardly fit for so important a trust.

Theodore said that he had read his book, and a man who was capable of writing like that was capable of anything. Besides, he had heard of his ability while in Mr. Broughton's service.

The end was that Aymer accepted the engagement, as indeed he could hardly refuse it. Still he wished to see Violet. That was certainly unfortunate; but could not Mr. Malet write from the railway station and send it by a messenger. On arrival in Stirmingham, and taking possession of his place of trust, Mr. Malet could at once write to Miss Waldron to come, and there was plenty of room at the asylum, and more than one respectable matron residing there with whom she could remain until the marriage could take place. He was so sorry that Lady Lechester

cherished a prejudice against Mr. Malet—that would wear off—he had done his best to remove it. Still, at present, Mr. Malet was not welcome at The Towers. Would he so far stretch politeness as to stroll gently on the road to the station? He (Theodore) would speedily overtake him with a carriage.

An hour and a half afterwards Theodore and Aymer were *en route* to Stirmingham. Theodore had explained his sudden departure by a telegram. He had received a telegram, it was true, as he constantly did; but it was as usual a Stock Exchange report of no importance.

From the station Aymer sent a short note to Violet at Belthrop, by special messenger, acquainting her with his good-fortune.

They reached Stirmingham the same evening, and next day Aymer was formally installed in possession of a bundle of papers, ledgers, and account books, which he was

to balance up. He was shown the secretary's residence—a fine house, closely adjoining the asylum—and at night he wrote a glowing letter to Violet, enclosing money to pay her fare first-class, and begging her to come at once.

On the second morning came a note telling him that she should start that very day, and full of joyful anticipations. She would arrive towards night. Aymer dined with Theodore, and took wine with him afterwards. Presently he rose to prepare to go to the railway and meet Violet. He reached his private room with a singular sensation in the head, a swimming in his eyes, and a dryness of the tongue. He plunged his face in cold water to recover himself; but it seemed to increase the disorder. His head seemed to swell to an enormous size, and yet to grow extremely light, till it felt like an inflated balloon, and seemed as if it would lift him to the ceiling. Sitting down to try and

steady himself, he fancied that the chair rose in the air, and cried out in alarm. He managed to pull the bell, and then felt as if he was carried away to an immense distance, and could look down upon his body in the room beneath.

A servant answered the bell, who stared at him, smiled, and said—"Ah, your fit's on at last." Aymer's last consciousness was that he was talking very fast, without exactly knowing what he was saying. After that there was a blank.

Meantime Violet was met by Theodore Marese at the railway station; and a message in cipher flew along the wires to a certain club in London. Marese Baskette breathed again, for the cipher read—"They are here." A simple sentence, but enough.

CHAPTER IX.

A FASHIONABLE London newspaper came out one morning with the statement that a marriage had been arranged in high life, and that preparations were already in progress. J. Marese Baskette, Esq., of Stirmingham, and Lady Agnes Lechester were to be shortly united in holy matrimony. This announcement was of the very geatest value to Marese. Not all the wealth, or reputed wealth he possessed—not even the honour of representing so important a city, could obtain for him the position in society which was secured by an alliance with the blue blood of Lechester. His money affairs wore at once a more roseate aspect.

It was well known that Lady Lechester

owned large estates, and they were naturally reported to be even larger than they were. It was whispered abroad that, under careful nursing, certain incumbrances had been paid off, and that the rent-roll was now something extremely heavy even for England, the land of long rent-rolls.

People who had previously fought a little shy of the handsome heir, and asked hard terms to discount his paper, now pressed forward, and were anxious to obtrude their services. At the clubs, persons who had affected to ignore the richest man in the world as a matter of principle, on account of his ignoble descent, now began to acknowledge his existence, and to extend the tips of their aristocratic fingers. It was remembered that the doubts and difficulties which had beset his claim to the vast Stirmingham estate like a dark cloud, had of late in great part cleared away. The family council had "burst up," and there were really no competitors in the field. Marese

Baskette, Esq., in the course of a year or two, so soon as the law affairs could be settled, would be the richest man in the world.

At the clubs they freely discussed his wealth. When realised it would put the Rothschilds, and Coutts, and Barings, and all the other famous names—the Astors of New York and even the princes of India—into the shade.

Stirmingham, the busiest city in England, surrounded with a triple belt of iron furnaces, undermined with hundreds of miles of coal galleries, was it possible to estimate the value of that wonderful place? Why, the estate in the time of old Sternhold Baskette was roughly put at twenty millions sterling—that was thirty years ago or more—what must it be worth now? There really was no calculating it. Suppose he got but one quarter of what he was entitled to—say property worth only five millions—there was a fine thing. What on earth had the ladies been thinking of all these

years that they had not secured so rich a prize?

Lady Lechester was not a little envied. County families and others, from whom she had kept aloof for years, overlooked the disrespect, and called upon her with their congratulations. Invitations poured in upon her; the whole county talked of nothing else but Lady Lechester's wedding; even the great fire was forgotten.

In London circles the name of Agnes Lechester, which from long retirement had almost dropped out of memory, was revived, and the old story of the attachment to the dragoon and his untimely end in the East, was dug up and sent on its way from mansion to mansion. It was nothing but pride that made her refuse poor De Warren who was a handsomer man than Baskette, and came of quite as good a family as her own. However, fortune seemed to favour these creatures—why, she must be five-and-thirty; five-and-thirty, ay,

closer on forty; older than Marese—much older.

To Agnes, all the conversation that went on around, and the echo of which reached her, was happiness itself. The intense pride and ambition of her nature, which had partly kept her in retirement, blazed out in all its native vigour. Her step was slow and stately; her manner grew cold and haughty; her conversation distant. When poor old Jenkins's wife came with the ancient Bible, she bought it, indeed, and put it on the library table, but barely looked at it. Six months before she would have criticised it carefully, and entered a descriptive record of it in the catalogue which she kept with her own hand. Now it was disdainfully tossed upon one side.

A point that was sometimes discussed between these formal and distant lovers was the place of their future residence, and as Lady Lechester hated The Towers, and Marese said that the country house near

Stirmingham had of late been closely approached by the coal mines, it was finally settled that they should reside in a mansion near Regent's Park, which belonged to Lady Lechester, until Marese could build a suitable place. This he announced his intention of doing upon a magnificent scale.

It was singular that old Sternhold, whose life was spent in adding stone to stone and brick to brick, had never contemplated the idea of building himself a palace.

His son determined to surpass all the mansions of England; and the plans, when once they had been decided upon, were sent down to Lady Lechester for her approval. They were placed upon a table in the reception room, so that every visitor who called could not avoid seeing them; and it became one of the pleasures of Agnes' daily life to point out the beauties of the new mansion, and to show her own sketches for improvements. To such littleness did this

once noble and generous nature descend. The Stirmingham estate seemed to be endowed with the power of degrading every character that came into contact with it.

It was understood that Lady Lechester was to lay the first stone of this grand mansion when they returned from the wedding trip. They were to go to Italy, and make excursions in the Mediterranean in Marese's yacht *Gloire de Dijon*, the name of which he now altered to *Agnes*.

Marese's life at this time was one long continued triumph. The only danger that had threatened him was crushed; both Aymer and Violet were in safe keeping.

Theodore was still at Stirmingham watching them; perhaps a sterner keeper than Theodore might turn the key upon one or both ere long. He set his teeth firmly with a frown as he thought of that possibility. Marese was not the man to be threatened with impunity. At all events they were quite safe for a good length of time—till long

after his marriage. The marriage once over and he feared nothing. No scandal could seriously injure him after that. He should be secured with a triple wall of brass—of wealth, power, position.

The property at Stirmingham was falling into his hands like an over-ripe pear. Let the companies strive how they might, they could no longer discover any pretext to delay its surrender. The American claimants had vanished into the distance—that great dread had departed. He had paid off in hard cash a large share of the claims the building societies made upon him, for expenses they had incurred in improving the property. He had obtained a rule that the remainder of the claims should be discharged by instalments; and as now in a short time he should enjoy almost unlimited credit, there would be no difficulty in raising the necessary sums.

With other societies he had corresponded; with the Corporation he was on the best of

terms, having used his influence in Parliament already to pass a private bill of theirs, and they had no legal power to prevent his seizure of his rights. With the rest of his creditors he was not only on good terms—he was pressed to borrow more. Literally he felt himself, as he surveyed his monetary affairs, the richest man in the world.

Another success came to him. He had delivered his maiden speech in the House, and whether it really was clever or appropriate, or whether people were predisposed in his favour, certain it was that it had produced an impression. The papers were full of it; the reviewers considered it an omen of an honourable parliamentary career. It was quoted from one end of the kingdom to the other. His party begun to cast an eye upon him. Here was that rare combination—a rich man with talent. Could they not turn him to account?

Then came the announcement of the engagement with Lechester, and they went

a step further, and said something must be done. Something was forthwith done. An office was offered to him—not a high office, nor very remunerative, but still an office; and one only a degree beneath that of a Minister. It was well understood that no man ever filled that post without subsequently becoming a Minister. It was a kind of political cadetship. Marese accepted the office, and wrote to Lady Lechester, who saw in this a new proof of the career in store for her; and he received in reply the warmest note he had hitherto had.

Lastly, he was about to marry into one of the oldest families in England. This marriage was the sure and certain prelude to a coronet; not that he would take it till he had exhausted his powers, and felt it time to retire to the House of Lords. Yet it was this marriage that alone caused any anxiety to Marese. He grew, for him, nervously anxious as the time approached. It certainly was not affection for her per-

sonally; it was the extraordinary good fortune which now smiled upon him. Once a gamester—still largely gambling upon the Stock Exchange—he had imbibed a little of the superstition of the race. Hard as he was—cool, self-possessed, and equal to any emergency—there arose in his mind a certain feverish eagerness to get it over; not sufficient to curtail his rest, or cause him to exhibit any outward sign, or even to diminish his glory in his success; but there was just this dash of uncertain bitter in the cup that was rising to his lip. He dared not hurry on the ceremony, knowing Lady Lechester's temperament too well: he must await the arrival of the date that she herself had fixed.

There was some little difficulty at The Towers as to where the marriage should take place. The church at Bury Wick was the natural resort, easiest of access, and nearest; but Agnes, even in her pride and self-will, could not altogether make up her

mind to be married in that church. The memory of the wedding-party so strangely and fearfully interrupted there, had not yet died away. It would seem like a bad omen to be married there.

Barnham was so far, and the vicar a Low Churchman, and not to her taste. Marese suggested Stirmingham: but no, that would not do. My lady would be married from her own ancestral Towers; and finally hit upon the plan of resuscitating the ancient family chapel at The Towers, and having the ceremony performed in it. This could be done by a special licence: which, of course, was no obstacle. It was true that she disliked and even hated The Towers; but the pride of family and long descent overcame that feeling. She would be married in the old chapel. Accordingly, workmen were sent for, and the sound of hammer and plane resounded through the place. The chapel, disused ever since the Lechesters left the Church of Rome—about

a century ago—was completely renovated, cleaned, painted, gilded, and adorned in every possible manner.

Time flew, and Agnes' pen was busy in marking the list of names of those who were eligible to receive an invitation to the marriage. The dresses were ordered. Agnes was very hard to please—even a simple village maiden likes to exercise her choice for that once in her life. Judge, then, of the difficulty of pleasing the mistress of The Towers, soon to be the richest lady in the world. Nothing was good enough: the orders were countermanded day after day, and nothing but the enormous sums that were to be expended could have reconciled the tradesmen to her incessant caprices.

Yet through all this loud sound of preparation, through all this silk and satin, through everything that could be devised to make the heart content, there penetrated a trouble. Agnes would at times retire to her private room, and remain secluded for

hours. After these solitary fits her step was slower, and her countenance pale and melancholy, till she gradually recovered herself. She had broken off her habit of visiting the Kickwell Pot. It had been a great trial to her to do so; but she had at last firmly made up her mind, and had conquered the singular fascination which drew her thither. She had decided upon the earthly career: she would close her eyes to the immortal one. But the memory of the spirit was not so easily effaced: she mused on its shape, its graceful, swaying elegance of motion, the glow in its wonderful eyes, and felt at times the thrill of its electric touch. It required immense strength of mind to resist the temptation to converse once more with her phantom-lover.

Who that had for a moment contemplated the proud and happy position of Lady Lechester, the observed of all observers, would have credited that such a

hankering, such an extraordinary belief, still possessed her mind?

Time flew, and there remained but one brief week till the marriage day. Marese was to come to The Towers on the morrow, and stay till the day previous to the ceremony when he was, in obedience to the old etiquette, to sleep at Barnham. For one day only would she be alone at The Towers. Marese came; the hours flew; some little warmth infused itself even into their cold intercourse. Just before dinner he left The Towers for Barnham. After dark, Lady Agnes went out alone, wrapped in her plaid shawl, and made her way to "The Pot."

The morrow was her wedding-day, yet the old fascination had conquered—she could not resist it. Once more, for the last time, she would look upon the face of that glorious being, and beg his forgiveness. It was May now—beautiful May. The beech trees were covered with foliage,

the air was soft and warm, and there was a delicate odour at times of the hawthorn blossom borne upon the gentle breeze. Only in places there was a low white mist, a dew hanging like a light cloud a few feet above the earth. A thin column of such a mist hung over the mouth of "The Pot," spectral, ghost-like. There had been heavy rains previously, and the river was swollen and turbid. Its roar came up in a sullen hoarse murmur through the narrow tunnel. Over the steep down or cliff there shone one lucent planet—the evening star.

Agnes stole out from among the fern and beech trees, and stood beside the great decaying oak trunk, leaning lightly against it. Before her but two steps was the mouth of "The Pot," and over it hovered the thin mist.

The old, old fascination fell upon her, the same half unconsciousness of all sur-

rounding things. The star grew dim, the roar of the river receded to an immense distance, and then arose the spirit. What intercourse they had cannot be told: whether she half yielded to the desire to soar above this earthly ball, and stepped forward to his embrace — whether she eagerly implored for pardon for her weakness, dazzled by worldly glory.

The dog Dando had followed her unchidden. He alone of all that had pertained to Aymer and Violet, Agnes had retained. He knew the old path so well. He crouched so still at the foot of the great oak trunk. So quietly, so heedlessly, taking no heed of the figure, the shadow that stole onward in the dark beneath the beech trees—stole forward from trunk to trunk, from bunch of fern to hawthorn bush.

A grey shadow in the form of a man—a crouching, stealthy, gliding approach—yet the dog Dando made no sign. And

Agnes stood with arms extended almost over the mouth of "The Pot." And the grey shadow reached the hollow oak trunk.

In the left hand of this shadow was a *tin whistle.*

CHAPTER X.

AFTER awhile, Aymer awoke from the stupor into which the drug that had been administered to him had thrown his senses. His awakening was more painful than the first effects of the poison. His head felt as heavy as lead, and there was a dull pain across his brow. A languid helplessness seemed to possess his limbs, he could not walk across the room, and with difficulty stretched out his hand to the bell-rope. Then all the designs upon the wall-papering got mixed up before his eyes in a fantastic dance, which made him giddy, till he was obliged to shut them. His consciousness had as yet barely sufficiently returned for him to notice that he was in a different apartment to any he

had hitherto occupied at the asylum. He must have had partial returns to consciousness previously, for he found himself sitting in a large arm-chair, half clad, and wearing a dressing-gown. A second pull at the bell-rope brought footsteps outside the door, which sounded heavy upon the boards, evidently uncarpeted. Then a key turned in the lock outside, at the sound of that Aymer opened his eyes quickly, and a strong-looking man, whom he had never seen before, peered in.

"Where is Mr. Theodore?" said Aymer. "Is Miss Waldron come? Tell them I am better. Ask her to see me. What has been the matter with me?"

"You've had one of your fits, sir," replied the man, very civilly, but in an indifferent tone.

"My fits! I never have fits. Why do you stand in the doorway? Why was the door locked?"

"All right sir — don't excite yourself.

There, you see you can't stand. It's your head, sir, your head."

"Send me a doctor instantly," said Aymer.

"A doctor? He's been to see you three or four times."

"Three or four times! How long have I been ill, then?"

"Oh, five days, I think. Let's see, you were brought over here on the Tuesday I remember—yes, five days."

"Brought over here? What do you mean? Who the deuce *are* you?" said Aymer, for the first time growing suspicious, and standing up by dint of effort.

"Do sit still, sir, and keep calm, or you'll have another fit. My name's Davidson; I'm a warder; and I'll take good care of you, sir, if you'll only keep quiet."

The truth flashed into Aymer's mind in an instant.

"Do you mean to say I am in the madhouse?" he asked, quietly.

"Well, no, sir, not quite so bad as that. This is an asylum, sir."

"How did I get here?"

"You were carried over in your fit."

"And where's Miss Waldron? Tell her to come to me at once."

"There's no Miss Waldron, sir; your head is not quite clear yet."

"What! you don't mean to say that *you* believe me mad?"

"Well, your papers is all right, sir."

Aymer lost his temper, as well he might.

"Mr. Theodore must be mad," he said. "Tell him to come at once; no, I'll go to him."

With an effort he reached the door; but Davidson easily kept him back with one hand, in his weak state.

"Now do keep quiet, sir—do sit down."

"I tell you I'm the secretary," said Aymer, his breath coming fast and thick, for he began to feel that he was trapped.

"Ay, ay, sir; they all say that, or

something like it. You see, we likes to get people to come quiet, without any noise. One gent came here thinking it was his family mansion, and he was a duke. If you'll sit down, sir, I'll get you anything you want."

Poor Aymer was obliged to totter to his chair.

"And where's Violet — where's Miss Waldron?" he said.

"There isn't no such person, sir. 'Tis your head; you'll be better presently. I'll look in again by-and-by."

The door shut, the lock turned. Aymer knew that he was a prisoner. For a few minutes he really was mad, frenzied with unusual passion and indignation, to be trapped like an animal lured on by provender, and for what purpose? Ah, for what purpose? Violet—it must be Violet—her claim to the Stirmingham estate. He was trapped that he might not follow up the clue. Where was she? Doubtless spirited away

somewhere, or perhaps expecting him at Belthrop, thinking he was coming to her. They would be sure to keep them as far apart as possible. Theodore was Marese Baskette's cousin, his friend, his confidant; he saw it all—he had been drugged, stupefied, made to utter every species of nonsense, to appear literally mad. He looked round the room; it was to all appearance an ordinary apartment, except that the door was strong, and without panels to weaken it. He staggered to the window, he put it up; there were no bars, no iron rods to prevent him getting out; but he looked down — a drop of twenty feet — into a narrow, stone-paved courtyard. A bitter thought entered his mind: they would rather like him to commit suicide out of that window. Opposite, about ten feet distant, ran an immensely high stone wall, crenelated on the top, and over that he could catch a glimpse of the blue May sky. He understood now why the corridor was

evidently uncarpeted; if by any means he should get out at the door, his steps would sound, and give the alarm at once. He sat down and tried to think; either the excitement, or the natural strength of his constitution was fast overcoming the poison. His head was clearer, and he could see distinctly, but his limbs were still feeble. What could he do?

At this moment the key again turned in the lock, and Davidson entered, bearing a tray with an appetising dinner.

"How do I know these things are not drugged also?" said Aymer.

"Drugged, sir? That's always their delusion. Them's good victuals. I'll taste if you like." And he did so.

While his head was turned, Aymer, weak as he was, made a rush at the door. The warder turned and seized him, and led him back to his chair like a child. Aymer, mad with passion, threatened him, and snatched at a knife upon the table.

"Ay, ay; steady, sir," said the warder, quite coolly; "that's no use, my waistcoat is padded on purpose. I've had him padded ever since Mr. Odo made a stab at me. Now, now, sir, do be quiet; you're only a hurting yourself. Eat your dinner and get stronger, and maybe then you can have a wrestle with me."

He glanced with a half smile at Aymer's slight, panting figure, and then at his own sturdy proportions, winked, and withdrew.

As his steps died away in the passage, Aymer started to his feet in intense astonishment. He had heard his own name; he could not believe his senses—was he really mad?

"Aymer Malet, Esq."

The voice was low, but distinct. It might come from the doorway, the window, the wall, the ceiling. He was startled, but replied—

"Yes; I am here."

"Young man," said the voice, very low, but quite audible, "take my advice: control your temper. If you stab a warder they will have a pretext to keep you here all your lifetime."

"Ah," said Aymer; "thank you, I understand. But who are you?—who *are* you?"

"I am a young old man. Who are you?"

"I am a young man," said Aymer, growing curious, and for the moment forgetting his position. "My name you know—I can't tell how. I come from World's End."

"Ah!" said the voice, sadly; "I had hoped you were sane."

"So I am."

"Why then say you came from the world's end?"

"I did not. I said from World's End; it is a place near Bury Wick."

"You are sane then so far. I know *that* World's End very well. I only tried

you. I overheard your name when you were carried in. Now, answer me. Why are you here?"

"There, that is what I want to know."

"If you do not know, you are not sane. Cannot you see the motive for your confinement?"

"Certainly I can. It is easy to see that."

And Aymer briefly related the circumstances.

"And where is your Violet?"

"Doubtless at Belthrop, or spirited away —perhaps abroad. Far enough from me, at all events."

"Not so: she is in this very place."

"I don't believe it. They would keep her away."

"I am sure of it. What should you do if you got out?"

"I should go straight to Belthrop—or, stay, perhaps I should go to Mr. Broughton. He would protect me."

"Broughton—ah! he is a lawyer. I see

you are sane. I must have a look at you. Turn your face towards the picture of the 'Last Supper.'"

Wondering and yet curious, Aymer did as he was bid. On the wall above a sideboard was a large copy of Vinci's "Last Supper." In a few seconds the voice came again; and soon he found it came from the picture.

"I see you. I have read you. You have talent, perhaps genius; but your chin is weak. You know not how to fight men. You do not comprehend that men are beasts, and that it is necessary to be always fighting them. Still you are sane, you are young—eat, and get strong—you will do. Your name is familiar to me. Who was your father?"

Aymer told him. The voice replied—

"I knew him—a clever man, and, excuse me, a fool. How came you to reside at World's End?"

Aymer told him. "But who are

you?" he said, eagerly. "Let me see you also."

"Very well. Look at the dog under the table in the picture. Now."

Aymer saw a slender white finger suddenly protruded through the body of the dog.

"But I only see your finger."

"Well, that is me. Don't you know that the hand is the man, and the claw is the beast? You can see by my finger that I have a hand."

It was evident that the stranger was proud of his white hand and slender finger.

"Who on earth are you?" said Aymer, beginning to get excited. "If you do not answer me I will pull the picture down."

"If you do, you will ruin us both."

"Well, tell me who you are."

"I am a prisoner like yourself. My name is, or was, for I am dead now, Fulk Lechester."

"Fulk Lechester—Lady Agnes' cousin!

Ah! I have heard of you," said Aymer. "You were very clever, and you went—well, I mean——"

"Ha! ha! ha! I will convince you that I am as sane as yourself—saner; for what a goose you were to be so easily trapped."

"So I certainly was."

"Would you like to get out? Of course. So should I. Let me see. First, I have seen you—your physiognomy is good; next, I have read of your book, for I see the papers; thirdly, I knew your father, at least I knew all about his career; fourthly, you come from World's End, and that is my neighbourhood; fifthly, you are young; sixthly, you are in love, which is a strong stimulus to exertion. Yes, you will do. Now eat your dinner; you must get strong."

"I will not touch it till I see you. I will tear the picture down."

"Oh, rash, headstrong! Lift it up instead."

Aymer tried. "I can't," he said.

"No, because I have fixed it. Now try."

The picture lifted easily, and Aymer was face to face with the stranger. He saw a little man, a head and a half shorter than himself, elegantly made, and dressed in the fashion. His brow was very broad and high, his eyes dark and large, deeply set; his lips perfect. He had a small moustache but no beard or whiskers. His complexion was the worst part of his appearance; it was almost yellow. Fulk smiled, and showed good teeth.

"I am yellow, I know," he said. "So would you be if you had not been out of doors for two years. I look forty, I know; I am really just thirty-three. Nipped in the bud. Ha! ha! However, there is no time to waste—the warder will return. Eat your dinner. Let us shake hands."

Aymer readily extended his hand. Suddenly he said—

"How do I know that this is not a new trap?"

Fulk smiled sadly. "A week ago you believed everybody," he said; "now you run to the other extreme. That is youth. I am young; but I am also old. Trouble makes men old, thought perhaps still older. For seven years I have done nothing but think."

"For seven years!" echoed Aymer, in horror. "Have you been here seven years?"

"Yes; I was then twenty-six, now I am thirty-three. Ah! I blossomed too fast. It is a bad sign, friend Aymer, when life is all roses too early; the frosts are sure to come."

True," said Aymer, thinking of his wedding-day, so strangely, so dreadfully interrupted.

"I was a Secretary of State at twenty-six. I had everything—money, youth, power, a career, a loving wife. A few hours changed it."

"May I ask, how?"

"Certainly; companions in misfortune have no secrets. My wife was thrown from her horse; her beautiful neck was broken. I had no son. We Lechesters are perhaps a little wild. Odo was certainly wild. Well, grief made me eccentric. I threw up my career. I was young then, like you. I resigned; I went down to Cornwall; I built a hut among the rocks, and said I would live a hermit's life. I did so. I began to feel better. The sea soothed me; I learnt much from Nature. You see, I had lived hitherto all my days with men. If I had stayed there, I should have written something great. But there were men who had their eyes on me. My property is large, you know; trustees or guardians do not get pay direct; but there are indirect profits in managing estates. My wife was dead; her friends did not trouble to protect me. Perhaps I did seem eccentric. Hermits are out of date. For years it has been the

custom to put Lechesters in an asylum. I was put here; but not so easily as you. I fought; it was no use. I might as well have been calm."

"And you have been here all these years?"

"All these years, but not without trying to escape. I pretended to be harmlessly mad—quite satisfied with my condition. I was allowed to wander in the grounds. One day I got up a tree, and before they could follow I was on the wall, I dropped over but broke my leg. Well, I recovered, but I still limp a little; after a while, I went into the grounds with a keeper. I tried cunning. I became harmlessly mad again—my fancy was to fly kites. To one kite I attached a long letter with an account of my imprisonment. I let it loose, and it fell in the midst of Stirmingham. But it was no good — it made a stir — people came here, and I answered their questions calmly. No good.

They were determined to see that I was mad. If I misspelt a single word in a sentence, it was a proof that a highly-educated mind had partially broken down. Like you, I got violent—I tried to despatch a warder and get out. Ever since then I have been in this room."

"Two years?"

"Two years. Hush—eat your dinner—Davidson comes."

The picture fell into its place, and Aymer tried to eat the dinner, which had grown cold.

CHAPTER XI.

AFTER Davidson was gone with the tray, Aymer could hear him opening other doors along the corridor, and waited till all was quiet.

"Fulk!"

"Aymer!"

The picture was lifted, and Fulk's head appeared in the orifice.

"Remember," he said, "your first object is to get strong; unless you get strong, neither of us can escape. Therefore, eat and drink, and above all, sleep. If you fidget yourself, you will waste away. The sooner you get strong, the sooner you will get out and find your Violet. Push your arm-chair up close under this picture, and speak low, lest a warder should steal along

on tiptoe. Take a book in your hand as if reading."

Aymer did as he was told. Fulk's head receded. "It is difficult for me to keep long in that position," he said; "I am not tall enough. But we can talk just as well."

"How came that hole in the wall?" asked Aymer.

"How came your book published?" said Fulk. "By the same process—patience and perseverance. No credit to me though. When a man is confined for two years in one room, he is glad enough of something to do."

"Why did you make such a hole—how did you do it? It was very clever."

"It was very easy. The poker did a part, the steel to sharpen the dinner knife did another part!"

"But were they not afraid to leave such instruments in your room?"

"Not they. Theodore knows very well

that I am not mad. He knows that I have too much mind to attempt suicide. As to the warders, they are strong, their clothes are impenetrable to an ordinary stab. Besides, I feign to be harmless, and at last worn out."

"There is no poker in my room," said Aymer, "and they have taken the knives away."

"That is because, as yet, they do not know your temperament. They think they know mine. So far as conveniences, and even luxuries, are concerned, certainly Theodore does not treat me amiss. I have everything I could have if I were free—papers, books—everything but tools or liberty—but I can improvise tools."

"How is it they do not discover this hole in the wall?"

"Simply because on your side it is hidden by the picture, and behind the picture I have preserved the papering. On my side, it is hidden by a mirror; when I open the aperture, I unscrew the mirror."

"But how did you know there was a picture on this side?"

"A person who was confined as you are told me."

"Was he sane then? What became of him?"

"Don't ask me. He was sane. It was a terrible disappointment when he went."

"But did he not return to get you out?"

"You do not comprehend. He lies in the grave. It is my belief—but I should alarm you."

"They killed him?"

"Well, not so violent as that. He died —that is it—before our arrangements were complete."

"Then you have tried to escape with others?"

"Yes, three times, and three times accident has baulked it. For that reason I wish you to get strong speedily, lest you should be removed to another room——"

"Or the grave!"

"Let us talk on other subjects. You do not ask how the hole was made, nor why. I will tell you. In the first place, it was made because I had hopes of escaping through your room, which was then unoccupied, and the door left open. That was vain, for it was afterwards occupied; then the hole was enlarged to let me and one of your predecessors converse, and to let him get into my room, as you will have to do."

"Why?"

"Because your window is a French one; mine has a bar or upright up the centre, which is an essential element of escape."

"Go on—how did you make the hole?"

"With the steel and with the poker—grinding the bricks into dust, and mingling the dust with the ashes of the fire, so that the warder himself carried them away."

"And why not escape this way?"

"Because, in the first place, the door of

that room is kept locked; secondly, because it opens also into the same corridor, and at the end of that corridor is the guard-room, where there is always a warder. Your bell rings in that room."

"How did you learn all these things?"

"How did you learn all the little traits of human nature, which the reviewers say you put in your book? By observation, of course. I had to walk along that corridor to reach the grounds, when I was allowed to go out."

"But you could bore a hole into the corridor?"

"Yes, and the bits of broken plaster would tell the story—that would be simple. Besides, to what end? Once I thought of boring *under* the corridor."

"How do that?"

"By lifting up one of the planks of the floor here; there is a space between the flooring and the ceiling, and that corridor has a kind of tunnel along under it. What

for? why the hot-water pipes, to warm the cells, are carried along it—the cells of the violent, whose rooms have no fire-grates—that is of no use, for the tunnel at one end comes to the furnaces, where there is usually a man, neither could I get through the heat. At the other there is the thick outer wall of stone, and just beneath is Theodore's own room—his ears are sharp. Useless, my friend. This knowledge of the premises seems to you wonderful, simply because you have been here so short a time. Why, I have never seen the outside of this side of the building, except a partial glimpse when I was brought, gagged and bound, in a closed carriage; yet look at this."

He handed to Aymer a sheet of paper, on which was an elevation plan.

"I can't see how you got at this," said Aymer, beginning to have a high opinion of the other's ability.

"It was difficult; but patience and observation will accomplish all things. I

learnt much of the outline by the shadow on the ground. Here is another plan, more minute; this is a ground plan."

Aymer examined it.

"Why, you have got even the locks and bolts of the doors," he said, in admiration.

"Yes, I should have made a splendid burglar—what a career lost!"

"But," said Aymer," "I see here 'water-canal' marked. I have seen that canal; why, it runs just outside the high wall just across the courtyard here."

"Ay, and that is the awkward part of it. First, a narrow courtyard or chasm to bridge; then a high wall to surmount; then a broad and deep canal—especially broad here, for, as you will see on the plan, there is a double width of water for the barges to turn round in. Finally, an unknown maze of streets."

"Not unknown," said Aymer. "I can be of some use there;" and he told Fulk of his residence in Stirmingham during the

family council and the election. He had a fair knowledge of the streets.

"That is extremely fortunate," said Fulk. "You must trace out a plan for me, in case we should get separated. So you were at the family council—I read much of it in the papers which they allow me. By-the-by, Marese Baskette is about to marry my cousin. I wonder she has escaped the asylum so long—the common fate of us poor Lechesters. Tell me now about your Violet's claim."

Aymer did so.

Fulk mused a little while.

"I begin to see daylight," he said. "I see much that I did not previously comprehend. If we only wait, and keep watching, everything comes plain in time. Waldron—I knew the Waldrons well—very respectable people, and well descended. Waldron is mentioned in Domesday—Waleran Venator—i.e., Walron, the Huntsman. Jason Waldron—I wonder if I had better tell you what I know?—he was

murdered, and—but you will not rest nor eat."

"I shall certainly not eat or sleep unless you tell me."

"Very well, but do keep calm; we shall be out all the sooner, unless indeed some unforeseen circumstance stops it, as it has hitherto done. *Ay di me!*"

"Do you know anything of Jason Waldron's murder?" asked Aymer, impatiently.

"I do; you have yourself told me. I had my suspicions—almost certainty—before, but I could not see the motive; now I see the motive—poor, miserable Odo!"

"Odo! what has Odo to do with it? Do go on; I am wild."

"Very well. Odo Lechester murdered your friend Jason Waldron!"

"But Odo Lechester is in a lunatic asylum, incurable."

"Odo Lechester was in this very asylum, but he escaped nearly a year ago. He escaped by permission."

"I am in the dark—explain."

"By permission, directed to destroy Jason Waldron. He had homicidal tendencies, you know."

"Homicidal tendencies!—escaped! Stay a minute, let me think. I remember now. Oh! what a fool I have been. Why, I saw the description of him posted up against the police station in Stirmingham, during the election; it was partly destroyed—evidently an old bill. I see—I see. But why should Odo Lechester kill Jason?"

"He was instructed to do so. Your dear friend Theodore, who so kindly offered you a secretaryship at seven hundred and fifty pounds a-year, told him to do so."

"Why—how—how could he——"

"Work on Odo's mind? Easily enough. Poor Odo — he is a beast, born in the shape of a man: it is not his fault — he is not responsible. Odo is a tinker and a whistler; he is at home among the gipsies and the woods, playing on his tin

whistle, mending pots and kettles. His three great passions are tinkering, dogs, and —liberty. Theodore simply assured him that it was Waldron who was the cause of his confinement. Jason dead, Odo would be for ever free. Shall I add one more word? If Jason's daughter were also dead, Odo would be still safer in his freedom."

"Good God! he may be killing her now. Let me out—help me."

"Silence! Be quiet. She is safe—your cries will ruin all. She is safe in this very building."

"Impossible—I can't believe it; it is all a blind. I must go to Belthrop; I must see Broughton. Good God, how weak I am!"

He fell exhausted back into his chair.

"How foolish of you!" said Fulk, gently. "But I can understand it. Now, I will tell you how I learnt all this. It was very simple. When I found that there was no escape through your room, I tried the other wall. I removed the clock from the bracket,

and bored a small hole. Frequently I had to stop, because I heard voices. I found the next room to mine was one of Theodore's own private apartments: it is the sitting-room, in fact. Beyond it is his laboratory. I should like to know what is in that laboratory: if we escape, I *will* know. He and Marese used to meet here and converse. I heard them; I listened. I tell you I heard things that would make your flesh creep. Are you better?"

"Yes; oh, that I was stronger! There is wine on the table. Do you think I might drink it safely?"

"Certainly not; but you had better pretend that you have. Pour some behind the grate; get rid of it somehow, or they will put the poison in your food. Well, I heard things about a certain ship, the *Lucca*."

"The *Lucca*—she was found a derelict."

"Yes, I know; I could tell you how she became a derelict. But Odo. Well, I heard them discuss that plan. He was to

be instructed, and then allowed to escape. He did escape. I only wish I was strong, and could climb like him. What he did, you know. If he is still at large, I will wager a hundred pounds I find him. I know his old haunts. But I could not understand the object of—of—— I see now. Waldron was the descendant of Arthur Sibbold. Are you superstitious? No. Well, I am—a little. In this case, now, does it not seem as if the blood of old Will Baskette, shot at the cider barrel, had revenged itself from generation to generation? Stirmingham was, as it were, founded with blood. Your poor friend Jason was a descendant of the murderer Sibbold, who shot the thief; and here is a Baskette continuing the vendetta."

"For God's sake, tell me how to escape."

"I will. But is it not Fate? Look at the chain of events—'circumstances' they are called now: the ancients called them Fate, Sophocles called them Necessity. But you are eager about escaping. Hush—they are coming!"

The picture dropped; Aymer looked down at his book. Davidson entered, and asked him how he felt. He replied better, and asked if Miss Waldron was in the asylum?

Davidson smiled. "Still on that, sir? I tell you honestly that no such person is here."

He looked Aymer in the face, and Aymer believed him. Davidson lit the gas, left several newspapers and books, and retired. So soon as his steps had died away, the picture was lifted again.

"I told you so," said Aymer; "she is not here. He evidently spoke the truth."

"He did so—so far as he knew. But this is an immense building; and you forget—you were not brought here at first—there is a residence, as they call it, detached. Davidson's duties never take him there, unless specially sent for."

"Well, well; let me escape, that is all."

"You have looked out of window; you have seen the courtyard—the wall. You

know that beyond the wall is the canal: all that is plain in your mind?"

"It is. First, we must get across the courtyard, then we must climb the wall, then descend and swim the canal."

"Ah," said Fulk, "I cannot swim."

"I can," said Aymer; "I learnt in the sea." He remembered his few bright months of wandering before he had met Violet.

"I am glad of it, though I had provided for that. The bladders that would have supported you, can carry our dry clothes to change."

"The bladders—have you got some to float you?"

"I have; but, first of all, the courtyard and the wall. We must not descend into the courtyard, because at one end there is a window—Theodore's window—and he is here now; at the other it opens on the grounds, and warders are sometimes about. It is the wall we must attack."

"All we want now is a rope and a grapnel."

"I have a rope and a grapnel. Where? In my bed. What rope? Bell-rope partly, partly bed cording. How did I get it? By being mad. By picking everything to pieces with my fingers, as mad people will. They humoured me, and I secreted half the pieces while they carelessly removed the other. I have a long, strong rope; long enough to go up the wall and down the other side. I have also a grapnel."

"That is fortunate. How did you make a grapnel?"

"I did not make it; the warder brought it to me. You wonder. But you noticed the crenelated wall: that is the secret. My grapnel is simply a very long, strong ruler, such as are used in keeping ledgers, and in some mechanical drawing; I had it ostensibly for drawing. This ruler must be tied across the rope; when the rope is flung over the wall, the ruler will catch across the crene-

lation. There is the grapnel. The rope at its lower end will be fastened to the upright pillar, or whatever the technical name may be, which divides my window into two. There's the ladder.

"And the swimming bladders?"

"I made them out of an old Macintosh, which I also tore up: I sewed them together. Mad people have whims: one of mine was to mend my own clothes; so I got needles and thread. They are also in my bed. They have simply to be inflated with air; they have cords to fasten to the body."

"How clever! I should never have thought of such things. But why did you not escape before I came? You had all the materials required."

"True—all the means; but not the physical strength, nor the physical courage. I could not do it without a companion to assist me. You forget my leg was broken; it is still weak. You forget that I have been confined without exercise for two years

—enough to weaken any man; and I was never strong. I used to envy Odo as he climbed trees, like the wild man of the woods he is by nature. Besides, I wanted courage; don't despise me. I have moral courage, but I have no physical courage. I jumped from the wall—yes; but under extreme excitement — this must be done coolly; and I could not climb the rope. You must climb first, and drag me up by sheer force."

"I will do it somehow," said Aymer. "But why not tie loops in the rope for your feet and hands? Is it long enough?"

"Plenty; I never thought of that. Two heads are better than one. I will do that this very night. How long do you think it will take you to recover yourself?"

"I will try it to-morrow," said Aymer.

"No; that is too soon. Say the night after. We must go as early in the evening as is compatible with being unseen, so as to

have the whole night to escape in. Now sleep. I shall not say another word."

He withdrew, and Aymer vainly tried to slumber. He could not sleep till morning, and he did not wake till far into the day. His breakfast was waiting for him. As he sat down to it with a better appetite, Fulk spoke to him from the picture.

"You look better," he said; "your long sleep has refreshed you. Shall we try it to-night? I own I am afraid lest some trifle should delay us."

"To-night, certainly," said Aymer. "I feel quite well now. It was simply a heaviness—a drowsiness—a narcotic, perhaps. Let it be to-night. I must go to Violet"

"Ah, Violet!" sighed Fulk. "That was my poor wife's name too. I shall love your Violet. I will help you. I know more of the world than you do."

The day passed slowly. They conversed in low tones nearly all the time. Aymer, led on by Fulk's gentle ways, frankly told

him all his struggles, his disappointments, his hopes. Fulk was deeply interested. At last he said—

"At ten we will do it, or perish. I have a mind," he said, "to let you go alone; you are stronger than I am. Very likely my nervousness or weakness will spoil the whole enterprise; but you could do it certainly."

"I will not hear of such a thing," said Aymer; "I will not attempt it without you. Do you think I am a cur?"

The dusk fell gradually—so slowly that it tried Aymer's patience terribly. Davidson lit the gas, and left him the evening paper.

"Glad to see you getting better, sir," he said, civilly.

He withdrew, and nothing now remained between them and the task except the twilight. Aymer kept urging to commence. Fulk thought it was not dark enough. At half-past nine a cloud came over the sky.

"Now," said Fulk; "I have got the rope ready. Take the picture down, and scramble through the hole. No; hand me your change of dress first. There is the rope."

Aymer had no difficulty in getting through, and at once picked up the rope. At one end he found a heavy knob of coal fastened.

"That is to throw it up by," said Fulk, "and to make the rope hang down the other side. I hid it for that purpose."

Fulk put the window open, shading the gas by the blind. Aymer coiled up the rope on his left arm to let it run out easily; and was glad now of the physical education he had unwillingly imbibed at old Martin Brown's. Many a time he had cast the cart-line over a tall waggon-load of straw. He looked out, measured the height, and hurled the knob of coal. It flew straight up into the air, carrying with it the destinies of two men, like a shot from a mortar over a ship in distress. A moment of suspense—

it cleared the wall, the rope ran out quickly, till but a few feet were left in Aymer's hands. Fulk opened the other half of the window; the rope was passed round the upright and secured. Next the air-belt had to be fastened under Fulk's chest and inflated. Aymer tied his change of clothes and Fulk's in the other air-belt, and adjusted them to his back. These incumbrances gave him some little uneasiness. He pulled at the rope—it was firm; the ruler had caught the crenelations. Then arose the difficulty as to who should go first; Aymer, with a lurking suspicion lest Fulk's heart should fail, compelled him to take the lead. He helped him at the window, and saw a new danger. Their shadows were projected on the wall opposite; if any one looked that way it would be seen in an instant that something was going forward. Below on the right was a bow window, and from this bow window a stream of light fell upon the rope. However it was too late to hesitate.

Fulk clung like a cat till he got his foot into the first loop, then he went up fairly well. As soon as he was up, and Aymer could see his form dimly astride of the wall, he followed. Half way up, as he looked down, he saw a man in the bow window approach and draw down the blind. If he had looked out he must have seen the rope and Aymer, but he did not. When the blinds were down the rope became invisible. With a beating heart Aymer found himself at the top of the wall, astride, facing Fulk, who pressed his hand.

"I feel all right now we have started," he whispered; "I think I shall manage it yet."

There were no loops for the descent. Aymer, after one glance at the city lights before him, slid down first, and let himself into the water gently. He adjusted the load on his back on the float: then shook the line as a signal to Fulk, who came half way down well, but his nervous excitement

overcame him, and he rather fell than slid the remainder, reaching the water with a splash. His head did not go under, but they feared lest any one had heard it. In a few seconds, as all was quiet, Aymer struck out, pushing the float in front and dragging Fulk behind. He had no load to support, but simply to force his way through the water. It was chilly, but not so cold as he had feared. It smelt unpleasant—some chemical works discharged into it. Though a fairly good swimmer, Aymer had a hard struggle to cross the broad canal, and more than once paused to recover his strength. At last they landed on the towing path, and without a moment's delay got over a low wall into some back garden and changed their clothes, wrapping the wet things round a loose brick from the wall and dropping them in the water. They then made haste along the towing-path, Aymer leading, and emerged at a bridge into a broad thoroughfare, gaslit but deserted.

"Come on," whispered Aymer. "There is the station; we shall catch the up 10.15 train to London."

"Is that the station?" said Fulk. "Then here we part. Good-by."

"Part? What do you mean?"

"I mean this: that I owe you my liberty —I shall repay you. I shall stay here and watch for your Violet—I am sure she is here."

It was useless arguing with him: Fulk was determined.

"I shall easily hide in this great city," he said. "We shall be on the watch in two places at once—you at Belthrop and World's End, and I here. Make haste. By-the-by, can you lend me a pound or two? I have no money with me."

Aymer insisted upon dividing the sixty-five pounds he had left. Then they shook hands.

"Stay," said Fulk, "our rendezvous?— Where shall we meet again? Quick!— your train."

"At The Place, World's End," said Aymer at a venture, and with one more rapid handshake ran off. He caught his train, and by one in the morning was in London.

Poor Fulk, wandering he hardly knew where on the look out for a quiet inn, came suddenly into a crowded street, and amidst a number of carriages evidently waiting. He looked up—it was some theatre or other. There was a large poster announcing that the famous singer Mdlle. F——o would perform that evening in the Sternhold Hall, and as he read, he heard a loud encore which reached even to the street.

"I remember her," he thought. "I saw her at Vienna the year before I was captured. They said she was this Marese Baskette's mistress—a splendid creature. I've half a mind—I haven't heard a song for so long——"

He hesitated. Prudence told him to go away; but talk of prudence to a man who

has just escaped into liberty! He walked in; the performance was nearly over, but he paid and went into the pit. "After all," he tried to persuade himself, "there's more safety in a crowd. When I go out, I can take a cab and drive to an hotel and say I've lost my train through the theatre; that will account for my having no luggage."

As he struggled in among the crowd, he glanced up at the boxes; his pushing caused a little movement, and people in the boxes looked down. He caught an eye watching him—he turned pale. It was Theodore, who rose at once and left his box. Poor Fulk gasped for breath; he pushed to get out. The audience was annoyed at the movement and disturbance—some gentlemen held him down—the notes of the singer's voice floated over, musically sweet. Poor Fulk!

CHAPTER XII.

SCIENCE, as illustrated by the printing press, the telegraph, the railway, is a double-edged sword. At the same moment that it puts an enormous power in the hands of the good man, it also offers an equal advantage to the evil disposed.

Theodore Marese was a man of science; and he was a typical man of science—hard, clear, bright, pitiless as the dissecting knife. Unfortunately, he applied his knowledge and his undoubted ability to the worst of uses. One pursuit to which he had devoted special effort, and over which he had spent many thoughtful hours, was the problem how to dispose of a dead human body. There was an old superstitious saying that

the earth will not hide blood—it will out. Theodore was of a different opinion. Science had conquered everything: science could conquer this. Yet it certainly was a difficult task. Did you ever contemplate the difficulty? Suppose you slay your enemy—slay him secretly, effectually: now, what next? Try to bury it: the loose earth speaks for itself. Exhalations will rise. Quicklime it, and hasten its decomposition: there will remain, perhaps, only a brass button, or some coin left in the pocket. Throw it into the water: it will rise to the surface. Burn it, and all the city will know from the odour. The more you think over it, the more difficult it will appear. But Theodore had found the solution.

In that laboratory of his which Fulk wished to explore, and which was a harmless-looking room—without so much as a phial or a microscope in view, there was at one corner, not very far from the fireplace, a long upright cupboard, reaching from the

floor to the ceiling. Or, rather, the cupboard rose about half-way, and a bookcase reached the remainder. It was a shallow cupboard. There were no locks to the doors. Any one could pull them open, and see a few trifles within—such trifles as might be found in any bachelor's room. The bookcase was also shallow, but there was depth enough back for some rows of books. The books were harmless enough—mostly medical works, just such works as any one can purchase who cares to. Nothing certainly here to excite suspicion. Yet behind that cupboard and bookcase was concealed the most deadly, insidious, awful engine ever constructed by man—an engine about which no secrecy exists either, and which living men have seen in operation; which has been described in the papers; and which the legislature must put down, or strictly regulate.

Upon removing one of the books, Theodore had merely to push aside a small brass

plate, which looked like part of a hinge, and there was a keyhole; turn the key, and the whole cupboard swung bodily out into the room. It was, in fact, a blind, placed in front of a narrow inner door, which rose to the ceiling. When the door was open, there stood revealed an iron box, not unlike an extremely long coffin, placed on end. There was a key-hole—two key-holes—to this iron box. Open the first, and there was a large cavity, tall enough for a man to sit on a bar which went across it, without his head touching the iron roof. In this iron roof there was an opening, not unlike a small grating. Put the key in the second key-hole, above the first, and there was the apparatus, greatly improved by Theodore, but in substance the same as used in other places — the apparatus for absorbing the smell of the gases which arise from a human body when consumed by heat. Every one knows that if the smoke of a pipe be passed through water in a peculiar way, it loses

its pungency, and you can inhale it with more comfort: this is the hookah. Everybody also knows that manufacturers in great towns are compelled to consume their own smoke, and all have seen a lump of loaf sugar suck up a spoonful of tea. A combination of these principles formed Theodore's deadly engine, which was nothing more or less than a private cremation stove. The ordinary fire in the harmless-looking fireplace produced sufficient heat, when a draught was caused by turning a winch with a multiplying wheel placed at the lower part of the cupboard, just beneath the cavity which was to receive the body. This body, made thoroughly insensible and unconscious by being saturated with chloroform or strong drugs—or, if you like, still more insensible with a trifle of arsenic—had merely to be lifted into its iron coffin, the door closed, the blast applied, and in a couple of hours or so there would remain a little heap of ashes,

and a little melted metal, brass buttons, coins, and such like, things easily dropped into a canal, dust easily mixed with the ashes under the grate. Now, where was all that superstitious nonsense about the difficulty of getting rid of a dead body?

Whether Theodore had ever used this awful engine was never known; but it existed, and it may exist at this present hour in other equally unsuspected places. What I say is, that the legislature should take cremation in hand. If any one had been shut up in that iron box alive—only stupefied for a few minutes with a drug, put in asleep; if they had been awakened by the red-hot iron, of what use would their screams have been—deadened by the confinement, deadened by thick walls?

"I am extremely sorry," said Theodore Marese, meeting Violet at the railway station, and handing her to a carriage; "I regret very much that Mr. Malet could not come. He has, in fact, gone upon a special

mission. A gentleman in the Isle of Man, who owed us a large sum, died suddenly; his affairs are in confusion, and Mr. Malet was obliged to start this afternoon to see to our debt. I am the bearer of his regrets. At all events, he will not be absent more than a week."

Violet was naturally much disappointed, but after all, it was only a week or ten days, and they treated her with great courtesy at the residence at the asylum. A matron was always ready to afford her companionship; no intrusion was made upon her privacy. Theodore occasionally called upon her in the most respectful way. Books, papers, anything she seemed to wish for came at once. The matron, a lady-like person, took her into the town to do some shopping. Everything but a letter from Aymer. However, that was easily explained—the sea-post was always uncertain. Theodore took her over a great part of the asylum; she was astonished

at its size, and the number of its inmates. It saddened her, and she still more longed for Aymer to return.

Why it was that she was not confined like Aymer was never wholly explained, but there is some reason to think that Marese Baskette had a faint idea of marrying her himself. He was, as we have seen, nervous about his marriage with Lady Lechester: lest anything should happen to prevent or delay it. This girl, Violet, he well knew, had a good claim to the estate; suppose he married her? She was a second string to his bow. As to the rumour of his being her father's murderer, he would trust to his own wit and handsome face to overcome that. He never questioned his power to have her if he chose—but Lady Lechester first. Theodore had therefore his instructions to treat her well, and give her seeming liberty, and above all to keep her in good temper. Theodore did as he was bid. This seems the natural

solution of the problem. If she had known that Aymer was so near!

It happened at this time that, on the seventh day after Violet's arrival, the famous singer, Mdlle. F——o, of whom all the world was talking, was to sing for one night only in the Sternhold Hall. Theodore, finding that she was getting restless and thoughtful, seized upon this opportunity to while away her gloom. He proposed that she should accompany him to the theatre or hall, and Violet, who had never heard an opera in her life, was naturally enough delighted to go. They went, and as it chanced it was the very night that Aymer and poor Fulk chose to make their escape. Thus it was that Theodore's eye caught sight of Fulk, the moment the commotion caused by his late entrance attracted his attention. Violet was extremely pleased; the notes of the music and song filled her with an exquisite enjoyment. She was very beautiful, lean-

ing over the front of her box, and scores of glasses were directed at her. Had she known that at that very moment Aymer was risking his life to escape!

The difficulty in this history-writing is to describe two or three events at the same moment. The eye can only read one line at a time, how then are you to bring two scenes at once before it? Some allowance must be made for the infirmities of the pen. There were two scenes proceeding at the moment that Theodore's eye fell upon Fulk—three scenes, if you reckon the opera on the stage. First, poor Fulk shivering with terror, struggling to escape, the crowd round execrating him, his mind in a whirl, reproaching himself with his folly, and the tall figure of Theodore, who had come down from the box, pointing him out to an attendant and pushing forward to seize him. On the stage, La Sonnambula was uttering her sweetest trill; Marese Baskette's mistress

in the full height of her glory, with hundreds upon hundreds of the élite of that great city intent upon her every accent—hundreds upon hundreds of well-dressed, fashionable, wealthy ladies and gentlemen, most of whom knew her connection with Marese, the popular M.P., were there. This very knowledge attracted them in shoals. This was scene two.

The third scene was underneath. There in the darkness and gloom of the cellars, amid the slimy pools of water, the hideous fungi, the loathsome toads and creeping things, the grey sewer rats were at work. You have seen a ship launched—she stands firm as a rock till the last wedge is knocked away, then glides into the water. Something of the same kind was going on here beneath the feet of several hundred human beings. These musty cellars and vaults under the Sternhold Hall, with their awkward approach, had been let at last. A London firm had given a small sum for them, and

established a store of whisky casks. A dozen or so of whisky casks had been rolled down, a name put upon the door, and an advertisement in the newspaper. Nobody could do business with this firm, their terms were too high. The whisky casks, in truth, contained pure spring water. It was an excuse, however, for men in rough jackets, who had evidently been at work, to go in and out of these vaults, and to take with them saws and chisels, hammers, and other harmless tools. The firm was, in fact, composed of a dozen or more of the sharpest sewer-rats in Stirmingham. Their little game was so delightfully simple—only a little gnawing to be done! When Theodore and Baskette went down into this place, they found the floor supported by timber pillars. Their idea was to blow it up. The sewer-rats were much cleverer—their idea was to saw through the wooden pillars, and let the roof or floor down, and with it many

hundred shrieking, maimed, and mutilated human beings. How simple great ideas appear when once they are described! There is nothing novel in the idea either: the holy St. Dunstan tried it at Calne, and found it answer admirably.

Some say odd accidents have happened to grand stands at race meetings, through iron bolts being inadvertently removed. When hundreds of well-dressed, fashionable people, ladies and gentlemen, with gold rings and diamonds, earrings and bracelets, watches, money, bank-notes, and similar valuables about them, not to mention rich cloaks and perhaps furs, were shrieking, struggling, groaning, maimed, mutilated, and broken to pieces, with jagged ends and splinters of deal sticking into their bodies, how nice and benevolent it would be to go in among and assist them; to lift up the broken arm, and lighten it of the massive gold bracelet; to pull the horrid splinter out of the leg, and extract

the well-filled purse; to alleviate the agony of the bruised shoulder or the broken back, and remove the choice fur or necklace of diamonds! Thoughtful of the sewer-rats to provide this banquet of Christian charity!

The one difficulty had been to get the several hundred people there. They had all in readiness for months, watching. They had it ready while the family council sat, and had deliberated about knocking the last wedge out at that time, but on reflection it was doubtful whether the Americans had much coin about them. Finally, one shrewd sewer-rat hit upon the idea of engaging Mdlle. F——o to come down and sing. They paid her one hundred pounds in advance, with travelling expenses to come afterwards; and it would have been a good speculation in itself, for they took three hundred and fifty pounds, including the boxes. These boxes were a worry. They could not be let down, they

were not built on wooden pillars; however, it was easy to shut one of the folding-doors at the entrance, and let the bolt drop into the stone—easy to raise a cry of "Fire!" —easy to imagine the crush at the door.

Easy also for me to enter into a catalogue of broken limbs, ribs, fractures, contusions, gashes, &c. &c.—I shall leave it to the surgical imagination. But when hundreds of people, closely packed, are suddenly precipitated eighteen feet, amid splintering planks and crushing beams, it is probable that the hospitals will be full. This was the third scene preparing underneath.

Just as Fulk felt Theodore close to him —just as F——o uttered her sweetest trill —just as Violet was in the height of her enjoyment—the grey rat gave his last nibble—the last wedge was knocked away; and the floor went down. Poor Violet saw it all. She saw fourteen hundred hands suddenly thrown up into the air; she heard one awful cry, she felt the box tremble and

vibrate, and the whole audience sank—sank as into one great pit. She turned deadly pale; she clung with both hands to the balustrade; but she did not faint. It was all too quick.

Fulk was in a stooping position, struggling to escape. That saved him. He fell with his body across a joist, which with a few others had not been sawn—some few had to be left to keep the floor apparently safe. His arms flew out in front, his legs struggling behind; he was poised on the centre of his body. At any other time one might have laughed. In that terrible moment the instinctive love of life endowed him with unusual strength. He knew not how he did it, but he got astride of the joist; he worked himself along it; he reached one of the slender iron columns or shafts which supported the boxes and gallery. He who mistrusted his power to climb a rope, in that hour of horrors went up that shaft with ease, assisted by the scroll-work on it. He

got into the very box where Violet sat, with straining eyes gazing into that bottomless pit. Exhausted, he fell on his knees beside her. Exhausted, he heard the cry of "Fire!"—heard the rush to the doors. He remained on his knees, gazing, like her, down into the pit.

The cry that rose up—the shouts, the groans, the shrieks—will ring in Fulk's ears till his death. Violet never heard a sound; her whole faculties were concentrated in her eyes. Heaps of human beings striving, heaving; fragments of dresses, opera cloaks fluttering from joists in mid-air; splinters with pieces of torn coats—Ah! I cannot write it; and she dares not tell me. One dares not dwell on this scene. One more word only. Fulk glanced at the stage: still the lights burnt there; the painted scene was untouched; the singer, F——o, had fled by the stage staircase.

It is odd, but the idea since came to me—she was the cheese; the hall, the trap.

The simile will hardly bear close investigation.

It was those few minutes that Fulk and Violet spent in motionless horror that saved them. They thereby escaped the crush at the door; that is to say, they escaped being in it; it was impossible to go out without seeing it. Fulk recovered himself a little: his first instinct was that of a gentleman—the lady beside him. He caught her arm, and dragged her up from her seat; and she came with him unresistingly out of the box into the corridor: he could feel her whole frame tremble. Perhaps, reasoning after the event, they might as well have sat still; but remember the awful cry of fire, the instinctive desire to escape, and that Fulk was still fearful of being re-captured! They reached the staircase—descended it to within a few feet of the passage. There they saw a black mass, writhing, heaving: it was a mass of men and women who had fallen, and been trodden down. It extended along the whole

passage to the open air. Then Violet fainted, and hung in his arms inert, helpless. Poor girl! it was enough to unnerve the boldest man. Fulk grasped her round the waist—he was short remember—he struggled with her; got his feet on that awful floor of moving bodies; he stumbled, and staggered towards the air, gasping for breath, dragging, half-trailing her behind him. He cried for help—his arms failed him; his poor, weak leg—the one that had been broken—slipped down into a crevice between two fallen men, and strive how he would he could not get it out. A mist swam before his eyes; but he did not let go—gallant little Fulk!

Strong arms seized him. Cabmen, police, coachmen, grooms—idlers who had rushed to the doors—seized him, and pulled him out, and set him on his legs, and pushed the brandy flask between his teeth. And still Fulk instinctively held tight to his burden.

"Where shall I drive you, sir?" said one cabman.

"To—I don't know. Where is a good hotel?"

"The 'Dragon,' sir."

"Help to lift her in."

Fifteen minutes afterwards they were at the "Dragon." Fortunate, indeed; for all the city—the great city—was pouring in vast crowds to that horrible doorway; and those who were extricated found it difficult to get away.

Fulk and Violet were well cared for at the "Dragon," as, indeed, they would be after so terrible a catastrophe had brought out all the sympathy there was latent in that city. Besides, they were well dressed, and Fulk was found to have money in his pocket—money, to do them justice, not one farthing of which was touched while he and Violet lay in adjoining rooms helpless—for they were helpless, utterly exhausted for six whole days. When Fulk, conscious that

he must be stirring, did pull himself together and got out of bed, and into the sitting apartment, the first thing he saw was a newspaper on the table, the *Stirmingham Daily News*, which had come out with a deep line of black round every page, and in which was a list of the dead and wounded; the killed were very few in proportion to the injured. Fulk looked for Theodore Marese; he found his name among the dead. Theodore was gone to his account; he had been found on the floor of the vault face downwards, quite dead. There was a deep wound in his forehead, and it was thought that, in falling, his head had struck the iron-bound edge of one of the supposed whisky casks.

Violet, when she heard that Fulk was up, came out of her room and held out her hand. She was still dreadfully pale; but Fulk thought he had never seen a more beautiful face. She thanked him with tears in her eyes; and Fulk in vain tried to make her

think that he had done nothing. "I was up yesterday," she said, "but I could not go till you were better. Now, will you please take me back to the asylum?"

"The asylum?" said Fulk, in amazement.

"Yes; Mr. Theodore will be anxious about me. I sent a message yesterday to him, but I have had no reply."

"Theodore Marese is dead," said Fulk, quietly. "I trust you have had nothing to do with him?"

"Dead!" Violet shuddered. "But I must go to the asylum; perhaps Aymer has returned."

"Aymer—what Aymer?"

An explanation followed, which will be readily understood. It was long before Violet could believe him; till at last his reiterated statements, and the little incidents he related, shook her incredulity. Even then she was partially doubtful, till Fulk chanced to look at the paper on the table. There was an advertisement in large type—"Escaped

from the Asylum, Fulk Lechester and Aymer Malet." She could no longer doubt.

"How miserably I have been deceived," she said, and burst into tears.

Fulk was greatly shocked.

"You see now that I must hasten away," he said. "Doubtless this great catastrophe has occupied men's minds, and interfered to prevent a strict search; but now I have found you it is a folly to remain here. My rendezvous with Aymer is at The Place, World's End. We will go to World's End at once."

"Aymer will be there?" said Violet, brightening a little.

"Yes, Aymer will be there," said Fulk.

That evening they paid the bill—to the honour of the "Dragon," it was a very small one—and reached the station in a fly. The same train that had taken Aymer to London took them also. They stayed that night at an hotel, and next afternoon travelled down to the little station nearest

to World's End. Another fly took them to the outskirts of Bury Wick village; and from thence they walked to The Place.

Violet's heart sank; it was dark, not a light in the window, not a sign of life; the doors were fast. They broke a pane of glass, and Fulk opened the window, got in, and unbolted one of the back doors. Fulk had taken the precaution to bring with him a few provisions, and had also bought the local paper—*The Barnham Chronicle*—and stuffed it in with the ham in the basket, for he was anxious to read about his cousin Lady Agnes' marriage. Violet made a fire, and got some tea: she had provided that. Where was Aymer?

A strange night that at The Place. Fulk felt safer now he was out of the city: but Violet had too vivid a memory of the past. In the very house where so many happy hours had been passed she was alone with a perfect stranger, or one who was a stranger but a little while before. And Aymer?

"Where could Aymer be?" was the question she constantly asked.

Fulk said, "Aymer was doubtless at Belthrop, trying to find her."

"But Hannah Bond knows I started for Stirmingham," objected Violet. "If Aymer should see her, and go back to Stirmingham. I must write to her—or will you?"

"I will go and see her," said Fulk; "certainly I will. But remember that I am in hiding; it must be at night. Wait till to-morrow night. Give Aymer that little time to come, then I will go."

"Hannah must come and live here with me," said Violet, musingly. "I think I shall stay at The Place till—till—where is your newspaper?"

"I—I—burnt it," said Fulk. "I burnt it helping you to light the fire."

It was the truth, yet it was a lie. He had burnt it, that Violet might not see something in it. Aymer was not at Belthrop. Aymer's name was in the paper.

"How shall I amuse you?" said Violet. "This is my home; I must amuse you. I will play to you one of the airs that Aymer likes. Poor Aymer!" she added, half to herself.

The gentle, melancholy music of Mendelssohn filled the room from the long unused piano.

Poor Aymer!" repeated Fulk to himself. Poor Aymer, indeed!

CHAPTER XIII.

AT twelve o'clock of the night before his wedding day, Marese Baskette was galloping, fast as his best thorough-bred could carry him, from Barnham town to The Towers. Barely had he settled himself at his hotel to think over the coming day, than a message summoned him to return. It was a splendid night—warm, still, the sky full of stars, and a faint odour of the hawthorn blossom in the air. The thin mist that Lady Lechester had seen had descended into the hollows, and as Marese rode through it, it reached to his saddle-bow. The horse rushed on, hidden in the cloud that covered the earth; the rider sat above it. Far behind clattered the groom, who had fetched him in hot haste.

"Lady Lechester is lost!" Such was his brief message, and not all Marese's sharp questioning could elicit anything more, for the simple reason that nothing more was known. About eight o'clock she had been seen to leave the house, and the servants took no particular notice of it, expecting her to return in a short time, as she usually did. As she usually did!—this was the first time Marese had heard of the nocturnal walks of his bride. It was a mystery to him: it angered him. A man of plots and stratagems, he was always more or less suspicious of others. An hour had passed, and Lady Lechester did not return. The guests—and they were numerous that night at The Towers—asked for her; the household still kept their mistress's secret, but two ventured out to seek her. They went to the well-known spot, they saw the oak trunk, they heard the roar of the river—but Lady Lechester was not there. An anxious consultation took place: butler, footmen, the

upper servants held a whispered discussion. At last the gamekeeper was sent for: if Lady Lechester happened to see him, she would not be annoyed; if she met any of the others, and fancied they had been watching her, it would cost them their places. The guests were put off with various excuses. Time passed: the gamekeeper reported the park clear, and not a trace of Lady Agnes. The truth could no longer be concealed. The alarm and excitement among the wedding guests may easily be imagined. All the gentlemen at once put on their hats, and with lanterns and brandy flasks proceeded to search the park in every direction. A man was despatched post-haste on the swiftest horse for the bridegroom. One gentleman rode with him to Barnham, woke up the police, and instructed them to be on the alert, but, if possible, to keep matters quiet. Especially they were to look out for the dog Dando, who was known to have

accompanied Lady Agnes, but had not returned.

Marese reached The Towers about one in the morning. During his ride he had mastered his feelings; he had crushed down the superstitious presentiment which warned him that all was in vain. He had not felt so unusually nervous about this marriage for nothing. But he mastered himself. One of his maxims was never to regret the past, but to apply the mind with iron will to make the best of the present. He called the servants, naturally taking the lead, and made them tell him all they knew. Then for the first time Lady Agnes' strange visits to "The Pot" became known; and at once the gloomiest forebodings filled the minds of the guests. She was drowned; she had fallen down "The Pot." The idea grew and grew, till it became the one belief. Marese himself could not doubt it. It was a strange and solemn conclave they held, at that hour of

the night, in the hall at The Towers, Marese standing in the midst, his face pale but composed, the guests crowding round him, the servants coming up one by one to be examined. The great clock at The Towers tolled two, and there stepped silently into the room a stranger, plainly dressed, but remarkably upright, with an air of authority — the Superintendent of police from Barnham. A silence followed his entrance. He marked it, and said that he had brought drags to search the river—was there a boat anywhere to be obtained?

There was no boat. The Ise ran so swift and was so shallow at ordinary times, and lay so deep down between its banks, that no one cared to keep a boat. The nearest known was a little punt four miles down the river, where it enlarged into a small lake. A man was despatched to borrow it, and pole it up the rapid stream; he could not reach "The Pot," work as hard as he might, under three hours. All the gentlemen and not a

few of the ladies, too excited to sit quietly within, went with the Superintendent across the park to "The Pot," and watched the drags used. The Superintendent asked them to stand back a moment while he examined the ground round the mouth of the funnel. He did so carefully; the grass had left no mark of a footstep, there was not a trace of a struggle, not a scrap of dress hanging to a twig, or a broken ornament. Then the drags were dropped down the strange funnel into the roaring water, and under the quiet stars the wedding guests gathered in a circle, watching the police as they searched the cave in vain. Neither drag nor pole could detect anything at the bottom; the light of the strongest bull's-eye failed to show any trace that a body had fallen down that narrow crevice; no stones or earth recently dislodged, not a particle of dress or shawl here either.

By this time the ladies were tired, and shivered in the early morning breeze; they

retired, but the gentlemen, greatly excited, stayed and assisted to fish the river Ise downwards for miles. The body would surely be carried with the current: but no, not a trace. The bright sun of the glorious May morning found them still at the mournful task. This was the wedding-morning. The thrushes burst into song; the cuckoo flew over with his merry cry; dewdrops glittered like gems upon the bushes, and the lovely May bloom scented the breeze. A wedding morn indeed!—but where was the bride? More than one glanced for a moment from the turbid river up to the deep azure of the sky, and the natural thought that followed need not be described. They met the punt at last—but it was useless. The man who poled it up had kept a close look out; nothing had floated by.

"We shall not find it," said the Superintendent, ".till the flood subsides."

Even yet there was one hope as they

walked sadly back to The Towers: the dog Dando—where was he? It was reasonable to think that if Lady Lechester had fallen into the river, the dog would presently return to The Towers. If he did not return, there was still hope that she had wandered in some other direction, or had met with an accident—sprained her ankle, or broken her leg in the woods, perhaps. This idea had occurred to the Superintendent and to Marese long before, and the gamekeeper, with eight or ten willing assistants, had been searching the woods for hours. As they neared The Towers it was obvious from the group of people talking excitedly before the entrance that something had happened. A policeman came towards them, leading Dando in a leash.

He had but just arrived in a trap from Barnham town. Questions poured out from a hundred lips; it was difficult to get an explanation, but it was understood at last. The Superintendent on leaving Barnham

had not omitted to warn the men on their beats in the town to look out for a dog—Lady Lechester's well-known dog—merely as a forlorn hope, never dreaming that Dando would wander thither. But a little after sunrise, perhaps about six o'clock, the dog Dando walked up the high street of Barnham behind a man wearing a grey suit, who knocked at the door of Mr. Broughton's private residence. Before the knock was answered the man in the grey suit was in custody, and the dog secured. The man in the grey suit struggled violently—fought like a wild beast, which still further prejudiced the police against him, and was with difficulty handcuffed, manacled, and conveyed to the station-house on a stretcher. No one to look at his slight figure would have thought him capable of such savage battling. He asked perpetually for Mr. Broughton, declared that he was not mad—which was strange, as no one had accused him of that failing, and refused to give

his name—another trait that looked ill. When asked if he had seen Lady Lechester he denied all knowledge of such a person. The dog had followed him just as any other dog might. As to the road he had come he was obstinately silent. The police had not waited to waste further inquiries upon him, but hastened to The Towers with the news for their chief.

His face fell immediately. "I fear," he said "that Lady Lechester is indeed lost. The dog would never have left her unless. However, we have now got a clue."

Marese gave up all hope; yet with his old cool self-possession before he started with the Superintendent for Barnham, he wrote out a telegram and despatched it to Theodore, briefly acquainting him with what had happened, and asking him to be especially agreeable *to that person*—meaning Violet, whose value as a second string to the bow had risen at once. This telegram was despatched to a dead man: Theodore

had been killed the night before in the Sternhold Hall, but in the confusion and the difficulty of at once identifying bodies, no news had been sent to Marese.

With the Superintendent, Marese went into the cell at the police station, and saw Aymer Malet handcuffed and manacled. Poor Aymer, indeed! His hair was rough over his forehead, his cheeks stained with blood from a scratch received in the struggle, his whole look wild in the extreme. He saw Marese Baskette, the murderer, the man who had confined him. Is it to be wondered at that he grew excited? He said nothing, but his face worked, and his teeth ground together. Marese looked at him steadily, almost with a smile. In that moment, swift as it passed, he debated upon his best course. Truth, or what he called truth, was the safest, although it would save Aymer's life.

"I know this man," he said. "He is a lunatic; he has escaped from my cousin's

asylum at Stirmingham. He is very dangerous: without a doubt, this is the guilty party."

Aymer denied it. All his efforts were to make people believe that he was not mad. As yet he had no conception of the darker shadow hanging over him: his one idea was, that he had been pursued and captured —that he should be sent back to the asylum. Therefore he had refused to give his name, or to describe the road by which he had come to Barnham. This very mistake increased the suspicion against him of a knowledge of Lady Lechester's disappearance. It will now be understood why Fulk burnt the paper that Violet might not read it, and why The Place was dark and cheerless when they reached it. These events had happened just before they arrived.

Marese never lost his presence of mind for a moment, not even when he heard of Theodore's awful death. Turn the mind to the present, was his maxim: do the best

with it you can. His one concern was the disappearance of Violet: still he felt certain that he should be able to trace her. At present, the one thing needful was to crush Aymer Malet. He held that enemy now in the hollow of his hand: he should "taste his finger," as the Orientals say.

The magistrates on hearing the evidence at once made out a warrant, and Aymer was remanded, while the search went on for the body, which still eluded all search. Upon the third day, however, some important evidence turned up, and it was thought best to take it in the presence of the prisoner. Aymer was in consequence led into the large apartment used for such purposes at the police-station, still wearing the handcuffs, for Marese had industriously spread the belief that he was a dangerous lunatic. The general public were not admitted; but a few gentlemen were present, and among these was Mr. Broughton, who at once recognised Aymer, rough as his present

appearance was, and came forward and spoke to him. Aymer asked him to defend him, and Broughton, to his credit, said he would. To his credit, for his interest in the Lechester estates was large.

The magistrates seeing so respectable a solicitor as Mr. Broughton taking an interest in the prisoner, consulted, and to Marese's intense disgust offered to allow the prisoner half an hour to confer with his attorney. In that brief period poor Aymer had to relate his confinement and his escape. Broughton listened attentively; then he said—

"Your story is strange, almost incredible; still you are in a position where nothing will do you much good but public opinion. My usual advice would be to reserve your defence; my present advice to you is to tell the Bench exactly what you have told me, only much more fully. There are no reporters admitted; but I will see that your statement is published. I believe you my-

self. If the public show any signs of believing you, the prosecutors will withdraw. It is your only chance; for, to be candid, the evidence is terribly against you."

They returned to the justice-room. The first witness called was the policeman who had detected Aymer and the dog in the street. He described Aymer as walking very fast, and dodging from house to house as if trying to escape notice. This was point No. 1 against him. Then came the evidence as to his furious struggle with the police. One constable could barely make himself understood; a blow straight from the shoulder had knocked a tooth out, and his voice sounded hollow and indistinct. Such a violent resistance obviously indicated a guilty conscience. This was point No. 2 against him. Next it was stated, and stated with perfect truth, that the prisoner had refused to give his name, his place of residence, or any information about himself; and that, finally, he had totally denied even

so much as knowing that there was such a person as Lady Lechester. He had tried to conceal his identity in every way, and had deliberately told an untruth, for after living so long at World's End, how could he have failed to know Lady Lechester? This was point No. 3. Then he gave a very vague, unsatisfactory account of how the dog had followed him. He declared that the dog was a strange dog to him—that he had never seen it before. Now this must be also a wilful falsehood. Point No. 4. But the darkest evidence of all was reserved to the last. There was brought into the room an "iron-witted" ploughboy, with a shock head of light hair, small eyes, heavy jowl, and low forehead—the very class of witness most to be dreaded, for nothing on earth can make them understand that it is possible for them to be mistaken.

The ploughboy, Andrew Hornblow by name, told his story straightforwardly

enough. He said that he had been to the "Shepherd's Bush" that fateful evening, after work; that he had a pint and a half of ale, but was not any the worse for liquor. That at about half-past seven, or a little earlier, he left the "Shepherd's Bush" inn to return to the farmhouse where he slept. He went across the fields and Downs, and his path led him over a section of the park. As he passed a fir copse he heard some one playing on a tin whistle in a most peculiar way. He was curious to see who it was, and got into the copse. The moment his footsteps were heard the whistle stopped; but pushing aside the boughs, he caught a glimpse of a tallish man, in a grey suit—a dirty-grey suit—who seemed anxious to avoid observation, and plunged into the dark recesses of the copse. He didn't think much of it at the time; but it so happened that the spot where he had seen the man was within a hundred yards of "The Pot;" and talking of the disappearance of Lady

Lechester to his master, the fact had got to the knowledge of the police. Had he seen that man since? Not till he had come into the room; and he pointed at the prisoner, who indeed wore a grey suit, somewhat travel-stained and frayed in places, as if from passage through hedges or woods.

Mr. Broughton cross-examined this witness at great length, and with his accustomed shrewdness—but in vain, the ploughboy was certain the prisoner was the man. All that could be got from him was, that he had not distinctly seen the face of the man in the copse, but he was tallish, and wore a dirty-grey suit. This established the fact that the prisoner was near about the spot, where Lady Lechester had disappeared somewhere within half an hour of that mysterious event.

Point No. 6 was still more convincing. Upon the prisoner being searched, there was found upon him a tin whistle. The whistle was produced, and was of a peculiar con-

struction: when blown, it gave a singular sound, more musical than the ordinary whistle. It was covered with sketches—apparently engraved with a sharp tool—of dogs, some of them very spirited and faithful outline representations. It was well known that the prisoner was a good draughtsman. The only point that remained to be established was the death of Lady Lechester. The body had not been found.

Upon this evidence the police very properly asked for a remand till the body was discovered.

Mr. Broughton immediately applied for bail.

The Bench asked upon what grounds, and this gave Aymer an opportunity to tell his tale. Remember, that all this time Marese Baskette was sitting side by side with the magistrates, who naturally felt for his position, and treated him with exceptional courtesy.

When Aymer began, Marese objected on

the ground that the prisoner was a lunatic escaped from Stirmingham Asylum, and that these wild statements, if they got into print, would do him harm. The Bench assured him that nothing the prisoner—whose wild appearance proved the condition of his mind—could say would prejudice him in their estimation, and as there were no reporters present nothing could get abroad. It was better to let the prisoner tell his tale; he might inadvertently disclose the fate of poor Lady Lechester. It was true that the prisoner being a lunatic would escape the extreme penalty of the law, but it was very desirable to learn all that could be known of poor Lady Agnes. Marese had to be satisfied, and to listen while Aymer, in clear, forcible language, told his story, hinting broadly at Marese's complicity in the death of Jason Waldron, and describing the manner in which he had been trapped, and his escape. The Bench listened with an incredulous air, as well they might. The man was evidently

mad—quite mad. Finally, Aymer came to his arrival at Belthrop late in the afternoon of the day after he had got out of the asylum. Finding Violet was not at Hannah Bond's, and greatly alarmed, he was at a loss what to do. To go back to Stirmingham was extremely dangerous for fear of re-capture, and he hesitated for a while. At last, after partaking of refreshment given to him by old Hannah, he had started for Barnham with the intention of calling on Mr. Broughton and taking his advice. Half way to Barnham it had occurred to him that perhaps Violet after all was at The Towers, and he diverged from his course and approached the mansion, as he supposed, about one in the morning. He saw a number of people about and in commotion, and afraid of being recognised and captured altered his mind again, and turned to go to Barnham across the Downs. In doing so he admitted that he had passed near "The Pot," but not at the time stated by the

ploughboy—half-past seven in the evening—but half-past one in the morning. As he walked through the grass he saw something glistening, and picked up the tin whistle found upon him. He should not have taken the trouble to carry it away had it not been for the curious figures on it, which, being a light night, he could just distinguish. As he came up the side of the Downs, just as he passed The Giant's Ring—*i.e.*, a circle of stones set on edge—some ancient monument—he was overtaken by the dog Dando, who jumped and fawned upon him with delight as an old friend, and followed him to Barnham where he was captured by the police. He had resisted them because he thought they were under orders to return him to the asylum. The dog Dando limped a little, and he had noticed that his back showed signs of a severe recent beating. Hannah Bond could prove that he did not leave Belthrop till nearly or quite eight, and it was impossible for him to get to "The

Pot," ten miles, in less than three hours, across a rough country. His dress was dirty and torn because he had walked quite twenty miles when arrested, and passed through several coppices. Upon this Mr. Broughton asked for bail, and offered himself in any sum they might name. But the Bench could not get over the fact of the asylum—the prisoner was a dangerous lunatic; even if his story was true he was a lunatic. No; the prisoner was removed to his cell pending the discovery of the body of Lady Lechester. All that Broughton could do was to order his carriage and set out for Belthrop to find Hannah Bond.

Poor Aymer. It was Violet he thought of still. But events press so quickly, it is impossible to pause and analyse his emotion. The next day about noon, Mr. Broughton came into the cell with a grave look upon his face, and carrying a large parcel in his hand. Aymer begged him to tell him the truth at once. Mr. Broughton told him

that first the body of Lady Lechester had been found. A more careful search by boat near "The Pot" had discovered it. Instead of being carried down by the current, an eddy at the cave had thrown it up against the course of the stream a few yards, and lodged it behind a boulder. There were no marks of violence: she had simply been drowned. Secondly, he had been to Belthrop, and found Hannah Bond's cottage shut up, the old lady gone, and not a trace of her to be found, though he had searched the villages for miles round. Thirdly, the book parcel in his hand had been to London to Aymer's address there, and had been returned to him, Aymer having left instructions that his letters should be sent to Mr. Broughton. Upon removing the outer wrapper, there was the name and address of Aymer Malet, Esq., written in the handwriting of the dead Lady Lechester.

CHAPTER XIV.

FULK had a difficult game to play. In the first place, his motions were restricted by the dread of Marese's emissaries: he could only go out at night. He wished to preserve Violet from a knowledge of Aymer's misfortune, and yet to go to work himself to release his friend. The first thing to do was to get Hannah Bond to The Place, for clearly Violet could not remain there alone with him. Knowing the country well, he had no difficulty on the night after their arrival—the very night after the preliminary examination of Aymer Malet—in finding his way to Belthrop. He explained the circumstances to Hannah, who at once packed up a few things, and walked back with him over the Downs to

The Place, without awakening one of her neighbours. This was how Hannah Bond disappeared.

Fulk's knowledge of the circumstances under which Aymer had been arrested was very meagre, but on the third day the *Barnham Chronicle* came out, and Hannah got him a copy. In it was a full, almost verbatim, account of the preliminary examination, furnished, in fact, by Mr. Broughton. Over this paper Fulk spent the greater part of the night thinking. He shut himself up in a room at The Place on the pretence that he had letters to write, and studied the report, line for line and word for word. After an hour or two, his eye became irresistibly attracted by a little paragraph in small type, evidently added at the last moment before going to press. It was but a few lines, announcing that the dog Dando had again disappeared from The Towers. He had been chained up carefully as was supposed, but he had

gone in the night. This little paragraph fixed Fulk's attention. He tried to follow the dog's motions. Why, when Lady Lechester fell down "The Pot," did not the dog return to The Towers? Why did he turn up at The Giant's Ring, with a limp in one leg, as if from a kick, and his back bearing marks of a severe beating? How came that odd and peculiar whistle in the grass—how came there to be two men in grey, one at half-past seven, the other at half-past one? The ploughboy had heard a peculiar whistling. By degrees the conviction forced itself into his mind that the other man in grey—the half-past seven man—must have been no other than his cousin Odo. All the facts answered to such a theory. A tallish man, playing upon a tin whistle; the dog—the dog was of the very breed that Odo had such a fancy for. The beating—doubtless the dog had been attracted by Odo, but had refused to obey him, and had been

kicked and thrashed till he ran off, and crossed Aymer's path. The Giant's Ring had actually been one of Odo's favourite haunts before he was confined. It was a wild and desolate spot. Fulk saw it all now clearly. Obviously Odo was still lingering about, perhaps trying to find the whistle he had dropped — obviously Odo had stolen the dog Dando from the The Towers a second time. If he could find Dando, he could find Odo; and Odo found, then Aymer's release was a matter of time only. Fulk meditated, and at last resolved upon his course—he would visit the haunts which he knew Odo used to favour. But Odo was a strong and powerful man, endowed with singular physical strength, Fulk was little, and by no means strong. Art must conquer Nature. Fulk prepared a cord with a noose, the use of which he had learnt years and years before in a trip to South America. It was a lasso, in fact.

Then followed an anxious time. Violet

grew more and more restless. Although The Place was so retired, yet people began to know that it was again inhabited. Fulk had heard of strangers being seen about, and he at once guessed that Marese had his spies searching for Aymer Malet's companion in the escape. Every night he went out upon his strange errand, hunting the wild man of the woods. Meantime, an inquest was held upon poor Lady Lechester, and a verdict of murder returned against Aymer Malet. Days and nights passed, and hunt and search how he would, still Odo eluded him.

It was a warm, beautiful evening. The same lucent planet that had so often shone upon Lady Lechester during her visit to the fatal "Pot," glittered in the western sky: but its beams were somewhat dimmed by the new moon, whose crescent was on the point of disappearing below the horizon. Fulk, pushing slowly and sadly through the woods and copses, inhaled the

fragrance of the pine tree. The rabbits scattered at his approach; now and then a wood pigeon rose into the air, with a tremendous clatter. In the open it was still light; under the trees a dusky shadow brooded. At a distance, he could faintly hear the sound of rushing water, and the fidgety chirping of the restless brook-sparrows and sedge-warblers. Suddenly there rose a shrill, piping sound; and Fulk started, and his heart for a moment stood still. He listened; then came a strange weird music—if music it could be called—for in its indescribable cadences it reminded him of the playing of the savages in far-off shores, visited years ago. But he recognised it in an instant. He had heard Odo play similar notes when they were boys. Gently, gently, he crept through the brushwood, and holding a branch aside, looked down from the bank upon the stream. It rushed along swiftly with a murmuring sound, reflecting upon its surface the image of the

bright planet. The sedges and reeds rustled in the light breeze; and there was Odo. Across the stream there was a fallen tree—the very tree Odo had loved in his youth—and astride upon that tree sat the Beast-Man, his feet nearly touching the water, playing upon a tin whistle. Before him was the dog Dando, standing on his hind legs, and moving in grotesque time to the music. Odo reproached the dog, and told him that he was an unworthy son of his father, and could not dance half so well—had he already forgotten his beating? But perhaps it was the fault of his whistle. Ah, he had lost his best whistle—the one he had made with selected tin, and ornamented with pictures of his dogs—among them Dando's father, who danced so much better. Then he muttered incoherent, half-articulate sounds to the dog, sighed deeply, and began to play again. Poor Odo!

Fulk hesitated. There was a large soul in his little body—he pitied the poor fellow

before him from the bottom of his heart. All that singular being wanted was the open air, and freedom to play his tin whistle, fondle his dogs, roam in the woods, and tinker up pots and kettles. Had he been permitted to follow these inclinations, it was doubtful if he would ever have committed crime; but civilisation would not permit it. For a whole year he had been roaming from wood to wood, from wilderness to wilderness, whistling, tinkering sometimes, always happy in simple freedom. Probably he had destroyed Lady Agnes to obtain the dog, the progenitor of which appeared to have been a favourite in old times. But Fulk reflected that, while he hesitated, Aymer languished in the cell, Violet was wearing her heart out, and his own liberty was endangered. Moreover, there was a duty to society: such beings must not go wholly at large, or no one would be safe.

The lasso hissed through the air, the noose dropped round Odo's neck, and was

drawn tight in an instant. It had taken his neck and one shoulder. He roared aloud with pain and anger, but the cord choked him. His arms struck out, but he had nothing to grasp. He was dragged on shore in a moment. He floundered—leapt up, and fell again, tearing at the rope like a wild beast taken in the toils. With a swift, dexterous turn of the hand, Fulk wound the cord about his arms and legs, much as a spider might its web about a fly, till Odo lay panting on the sward, helpless, but still hoarsely murmuring and grunting. Then Fulk loosened the lasso round his neck, and proceeded to tie the limbs tighter, finally binding him hard and fast to a tree. Odo's frame quivered; and Fulk, in the dim light, fancied that great tears gathered in his eyes. After binding Odo, there was still a piece of the rope left: with this Fulk secured the dog, which, frightened and astonished, had cowered on the earth. Dando evidently had no affection for Odo:

he had been wiled away by gipsy arts only. Then, leading Dando, Fulk set off at a run, tearing through wood and hedge, mounting the steep Downs, fast as his strength could carry him, away for Barnham town.

At that very time, late into the night, Mr. Broughton was conferring with the prisoner in his cell. He had been sent for in haste, and went quickly fearing lest Aymer should be ill. The parcel addressed to Aymer Malet in Lady Lechester's handwriting was a large antique Bible, which Aymer recognised in a moment as having belonged to old Jenkins, the gardener at The Place. He had seen it lying about, but had taken no notice of it. It was in fact the very Bible Lady Agnes had purchased of the gardener's wife when left in destitution by her husband's imprisonment. Inside the Bible was a short formal note, dated the very day in the evening of which Lady Agnes was drowned, stating that the writer when she bought the book was un-

aware to whom it had belonged, and therefore returned it to Aymer's address—not knowing Violet's—as she desired to retain nothing of theirs. She added that she would return the dog Dando if they would receive it, and tell her where to send it. Aymer, having no occupation in his cell but melancholy thoughts and anxious cares about Violet, naturally turned over the leaves of the noble old book, and looking at it closer than before he found at the end, upon one of the spare leaves, a curious inscription which purported to be a copy from a tomb. It was in Latin, English, and Greek—a strange, fantastic mixture—and when translated, read to the effect that Arthur Sibbold Waldron, whilom of Wolf's Glow, born Sibbold, afterwards Sibbold Waldron, was married at St. S—— Church, Middlesex, and was buried at Penge in Kent—with dates, and the usual sentiments. The entry in the Bible simply added: "Copy of y^{e} inscription, now defaced. Mem.

To have the same re-cut. B. W." Here was the clue Aymer had searched for in vain, thrown into his hands, by the operation of those strange and mysterious circumstances over which no one has any control. He sent for Mr. Broughton; and so it was that when Fulk found that gentleman it was in the cell. The surprise of Aymer, and his pleasure at seeing Fulk, his still greater joy and relief when Fulk in his first sentence announced that Violet was safe, can easily be imagined. Mr. Broughton had no sooner heard Fulk's explanation than he at once comprehended the importance of securing Odo. He and Fulk with two assistants drove as near the wood as practicable, and after much trouble safely lodged the unfortunate lunatic in the hands of the police. Fulk remained with Broughton, who very considerately went in his carriage in the morning over to The Place, and brought Violet and Hannah Bond to his own private residence in Barnham.

At the inquiry that followed, the first step was the release of Aymer on bail, on the testimony of Hannah Bond, that he had not left the cottage at Belthrop till eight o'clock. The ploughboy, when shown Odo, at once declared that this was the man he had seen—"A' had such mortal big ears—a' minded that, now." And Marese? His position became extremely awkward. It was easy to declare that Aymer was a lunatic; but when Fulk was produced—when the clever escape was related in exactly the same manner by both—when Fulk added what he had overheard about the murder of Jason Waldron, Marese could not but notice that the magistrates and the Court looked coldly upon him. He claimed them both as escaped lunatics. Said the Bench—

"We don't see what right you have to them. The owner of the asylum is dead. We will take it upon ourselves to say, that the lunatics, for lunatics, have a remarkably sane way of talking."

The result was, that Marese withdrew; the more he meddled with the matter, the worse it became for him. To add to the evil complexion of affairs, Odo confessed in his cell to the murder of Jason Waldron. He strenuously denied having touched Lady Agnes; he declared that his sole object was the dog. The dog was the descendant of an old favourite, and he had once followed Miss Merton to Torquay to get it. But as he stole round from behind the oak trunk to seize the dog, Lady Agnes saw him, started, missed her footing, and fell down "The Pot." He knew her—she was his cousin, and he had no feeling against her. In all probability this story was true, as no marks of violence were found on the body. But he frankly confessed hitting Jason Waldron on the head with the bill-hook; and stated exactly what Fulk had already said—that he was told by Theodore Marese, if he killed that man, *and his daughter* (Aymer shuddered), he should be always free. He had

laid in wait for the daughter; but she was out of his reach at The Towers.

Odo concluded with a cunning wink, and called Mr. Broughton to come near. He whispered to him that he should be the richest man in the world if he would give him liberty. Broughton humoured the miserable creature, and told the rest to leave the cell.

Then Odo disclosed his bribe. He said that years ago the gipsies with whom he consorted had shown him a deed, to which they attached a species of superstitious reverence, and asked him to read it, it being in law characters, and in Latin. It was a deed conferring an entail upon the estate at Wolf's Glow—"the very estate," whispered Odo, "that all the people are trying for."

Odo ascertained that this deed had been stolen by Romy Baskette's elder brother—the man who, with his mother, left the Swamp when old Will Baskette was shot—stolen

with the intention of injuring the Sibbolds, his father's murderers. He had watched old Sibbold poring over this deed, therefore thought it valuable, seized his opportunity, and stole it. With the strangest, maddest mixture of shrewdness and lunacy, Odo in his turn stole the deed from the gipsies who had preserved it, and held it, to be used as a bribe in case he should be captured. He now offered it to Broughton, if Broughton would only let him go free.

The lawyer must be forgiven if he told a falsehood, and promised. Odo told him where the deed was hidden; and, as he had described, so they found it. In that tree which had fallen across the stream where he had used to sit astride and whistle, half-way across was a knot. This knot with his tools he had cut out—excavated a cavity, and used the knot to hide it; so that the closest inspection must have failed to find it. They found the tree and the knot. They got the knot out; there was a small tin box—Odo's

own workmanship—and in the box was the long-lost deed.

Poor Odo of course never got his freedom; but there were friends who saw that he was as well cared for as under the circumstances was possible. Who could harbour revenge against such a creature? He was but the instrument in the hands of others, and not truly guilty of poor Jason's death. That lay at the door of Marese and Theodore. Theodore was dead. Morally speaking, Fulk slew Marese. He wrote a full account of what he had overheard, and it was published in a great London paper. The asylum was searched, and the holes in the wall found as described. By this letter Fulk secured two objects: first his own liberty in future—for popular opinion rose with irresistible violence in his favour; secondly, he destroyed Marese. Yet it was not the murder of Jason Waldron which did it; it was the *Lucca*. There were people who had lost heavily over the

Lucca, these people pursued Marese Baskette, threatened him with criminal, civil, and every kind of proceedings. He fled, escaping arrest by a few hours only, taking with him five thousand pounds in gold. He is believed to have reached California, but has not been heard of since. Whether the Nemesis of these modern days—"circumstances over which we have no control"—engulfed him in still deadlier ruin, was never known. His fall, as it was, was great indeed.

By the death of Lady Agnes Lechester, Fulk succeeded to her estates, which, added to those already his, made him one of the largest landholders in the county. If he survives Odo, he will be a still more wealthy man. He never left Aymer's side till all was well.

Aymer and Violet were married in the autumn—married in the quietest manner, and, aided pecuniarily by Fulk, left for the south of France, there to try and efface the

memory of the awful event that had embittered the path of their love. Fulk joined them with a yacht two months later on. They are very, very happy, but it is in a subdued and quiet manner. It is hardly possible for them yet, even in the sunny south, to feel so abundantly joyous as would be natural to their youth. But as the time rolls on they will gradually supplant the old unhappy memories with fresh and pleasant pictures.

The last letter from Fulk announced that the sea breezes and the fresh air had begun to work wonders with his complexion, and that he hoped ere long to throw off the horrid yellow produced by his confinement, and resume his proper colour. That was natural in Fulk; the proverb says that little men are often conceited. Yellow or rosy, or brown, he will always be the dearest friend of Aymer and Violet.

* * * * *

And the great estate—the city of Stir-

mingham? To this very hour that Gordian knot remains untied; to this very hour claimants every now and then startle the world with extraordinary statements; and the companies having nothing else to do, have fallen to loggerheads between themselves, and spend their vast incomes in litigation. But aided by Fulk's money, and the influence his family connections possessed, Violet did at last receive a portion of her rights; the chain of evidence proving her descent from Arthur Sibbold was completed down to the smallest link.

The Corporation of Stirmingham, after much law and talk, were finally compelled to acknowledge her claim. By arbitration it was settled that they were to pay her eight thousand pounds per annum for ten years, and at the expiration of that period, ten thousand pounds per annum to herself and heirs, in perpetual ground rent. The companies still hold out, but it is only as to the amount they shall contribute in the

same way; and they will have to come to terms. Violet will thus receive a large income without compromising her rights, which are specially reserved. She has not forgotten poor Jenkins, whose Bible gave the clue to the register of Arthur Sibbold's marriage. The old man is at last recompensed for his long-suffering—the imprisonment expired in due time. He and his wife live in the old cottage at The Place, tending the gardens as of yore, being made comfortable with an ample provision from Violet.

Violet and Aymer once a-year visit The Place and the tomb of poor Jason. They have taken a mansion at Tunbridge Wells, but spend much time in Aymer's beloved Florence, with Fulk. They love the old house, and yet they do not care to live where everything recals such gloomy memories as at The Place.

THE END.

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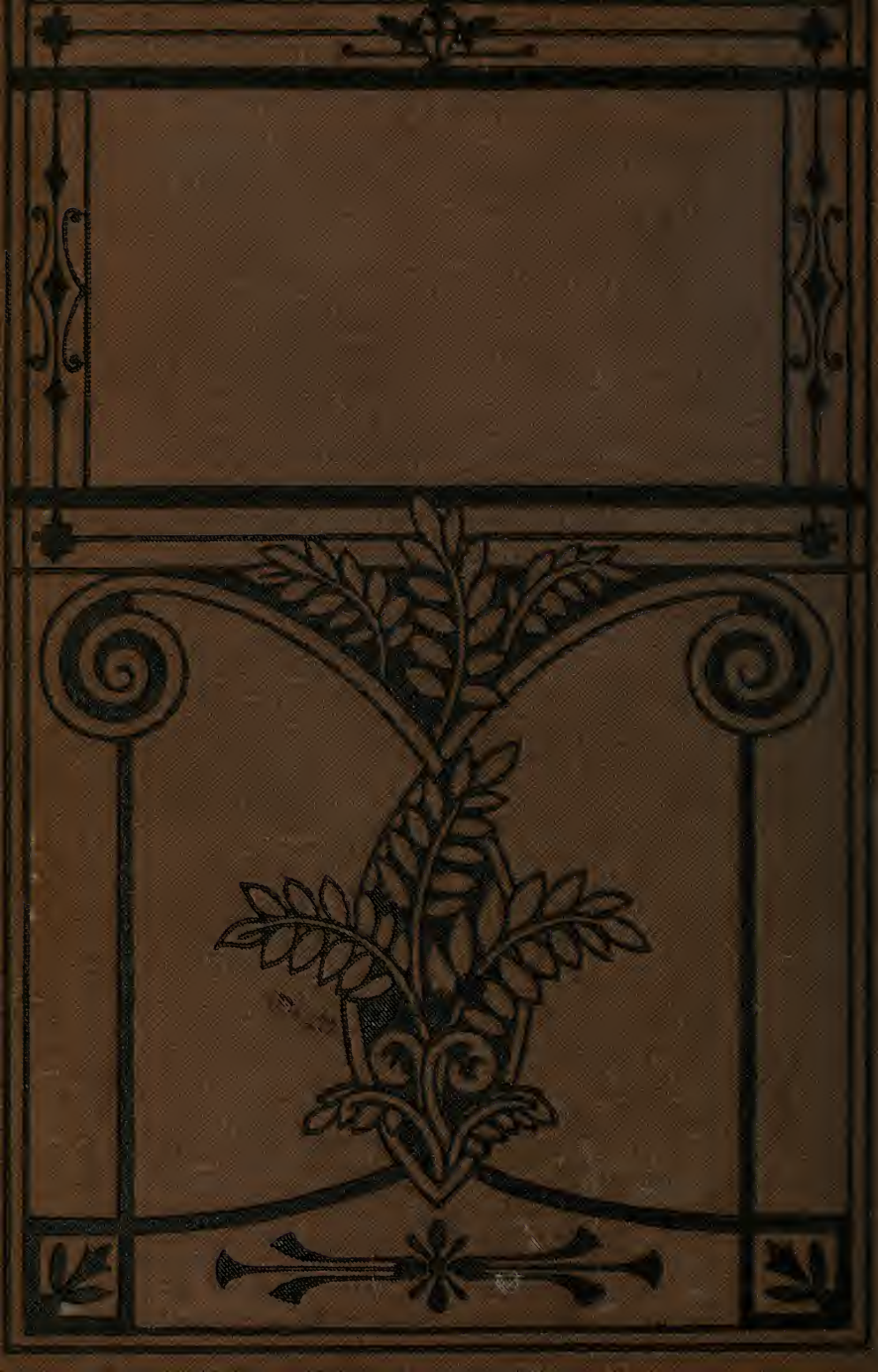
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